

**Reading Group Guide**  
**SECRET KEEPERS by Mindy Friddle**

1. **SECRET KEEPERS** includes descriptions of flowers that are real (tongue orchids, Amaranth) as well as imaginary (soul shines, secret keepers). Discuss the plants—both real and imaginary—and their effects on the characters and the town.
2. Consider how the epigraph by Katherine Mansfield expresses a major theme in the novel. [*How hard it is to escape from places. However carefully one goes they hold you—you leave little bits of yourself fluttering on the fences—little rags and shreds of your very life.*] Emma feels stuck in her hometown of Palmetto—do other characters as well? Besides geographically, what are some other ways the characters feel “stuck”—in marriages, careers, illness, relationships?
3. Palmetto is the kind of town where the past is thinly veiled by new development and change, especially to several characters whose memories are triggered by certain places or landmarks. Consider these places and the characters’ varying views of them: Amaranth Estate; McCann Square/Crossroads; Springforth Cemetery; the Confederate Monument; Emma’s doctor’s office; the Hanley’s back yard and “barn.”
4. Discuss some reasons behind Emma and Dora’s conflicted mother-daughter relationship. How has each responded differently to her own troubled marriage?
5. Bobby’s intense love of science still muscles through his schizophrenia, just as Gordon’s talent for gardening prevails despite his heavy drinking and painful memories of war. Discuss how both characters, outside of the mainstream of society, provide viewpoints that are skewed but insightful about the mysterious flowers and hidden garden. What do they see that the other characters don’t?
6. Kyle, a rebellious, conniving teenager, is also a keen observer of his parents, his grandmother, his uncle, and Jake. How does he change in the course of the novel?
7. Emma’s son, Will Hanley, died in Vietnam. Her grandfather, William McCann, died in a “firearm mishap.” Consider how both characters, though long dead and “off the pages” of the novel, still figure prominently in the daily lives of Emma, as well as several other characters.
8. Do you find Jake Cary, leader of the Blooming Idiots, a romantic big-hearted character or more feckless, naive businessman? Is he a sympathetic character? Why or why not?
9. Discuss how Dora’s impulsive, addictive shopping exposes her underlying emotions and insecurities. Is she having a crisis in faith?

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10. Consider the novel's ending, and how each character's life and situation changes. Which of the characters are taking their lives in totally new directions? Which situations aren't so tidy or decided? Consider what each character *yearned* for in the opening pages of the novel, and if—and how—those yearnings were met.
11. Identify some comic moments in **SECRET KEEPERS**. How do the humorous moments thread through the darker topics of grief, regret, illness, death, loneliness?
12. The quote that begins Part IV reads, in part: "The flower is a dying organ...a dying into being." Do you believe there is a theme of spirituality in the novel? How does the serenity of nature—and the powerful draw of plants—figure into the lives of the characters?