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**Reader's Guide**  
*Web of Angels* by Lilian Nattel

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## About the Book

Seaton Grove is less a neighbourhood than it is a small village within the city, with a storied past of industry and conflict and now gentrification and family. Its streets are lined with heritage houses with stained glass windows and its canopy of towering maples and lindens offers “a promise of shade and fruit for anyone who happened to look up.” But sometimes, the shadows beneath those trees and behind those windows tell a different story.

One Friday morning, the neighbourhood wakes to a tragedy. A pregnant teenage girl named Heather Edwards has taken her own life. Miraculously, her pediatrician mother is able to save the baby, and amidst the horror and confusion, the residents of Seaton Grove pull together to support Heather’s grief-stricken family.

The tragedy particularly touches Sharon Lewis, whose oldest child, Josh, is dating Heather’s sister, Cathy. In Sharon’s house, where freshly baked cookies are always on offer, Cathy finds refuge and comfort. But the extra stress of Cathy’s struggles makes it harder for Sharon to keep hiding who she is and how she came to be that way: someone with dissociative identity disorder (DID; a.k.a. multiple personalities), caused by early trauma.

As Sharon’s alters come forward to help in the daily round of life during this crisis, they also watch over Cathy, noticing subtle changes in her behaviour, mannerisms and facial expressions – changes only they would recognize and understand – and it begins to dawn on them that she may be like them. As they connect, a special bond of trust forms. Suspecting that Cathy’s parents may not be as respectable as they seem, Sharon finds herself on a path toward unsettling truths. When evidence falls into her hands, she has to face the most important question of all: can she come clean about who she really is if that’s what it takes to save two children from a hellish existence?

Breaking the cycle takes a village and, realizing that she can’t do it alone, Sharon and her alters reach out to her husband and extended family. Together they work to save the lives of an innocent girl and a newborn baby and bring to light a terrible crime hidden in the shadows of their neighbourhood.

*Web of Angels* is a powerful novel of drama and suspense from Lilian Nattel, the acclaimed author of *The River Midnight* and *The Singing Fire*.

## About the Author

Lilian Nattel sees each new book as “another challenge, another uncertainty, another learning opportunity, another chance to do what I love.”

Born in Montreal, Lilian currently lives in Toronto with her husband and two daughters. She always had a deep interest in writing, but initially chose a career as a chartered accountant, eventually opening her own consulting practice. Lilian’s desire to create was still strong, however, and she made the decision to seriously pursue her dreams of writing, going so far as to draft a contract with herself as inspiration.

Lilian honoured that contract by writing *The River Midnight*, a rich exploration of life in a nineteenth-century shtetl. It was welcomed with critical and commercial success in North America and Europe, and allowed her to quit accounting and focus on her writing career full time.

As a new mother, Lilian set to work on her second novel, *The Singing Fire*. A rich and detailed story of two Jewish runaways who flee Poland for the back streets of London, the book was a well-received exploration of the harsh realities of the immigrant experience.

Lilian’s newest novel, *Web of Angels*, is something of a departure from her previous books. Set in a contemporary neighbourhood of artists and academics, the novel follows a woman nobody would guess has dissociative identity disorder or a traumatic past, until she and her alters rise to the challenge of rescuing abused children. Gripping and suspenseful, *Web of Angels* illustrates the strength that family and community can provide to overcome tragedy and suffering and is sure to be embraced by readers and critics. The author herself calls it “my most challenging book yet, the deepest, the most heart-felt, the most demanding.”

Lilian’s attitude toward life is perhaps best summed up when she says, “Thank God for my babies, thank God for the love in my life, thank God for my work.”

To learn more about *Web of Angels* and Lilian’s other books, please visit [www.liliannattel.com](http://www.liliannattel.com).

## Discussion Questions

1. What are your first impressions of *Web of Angels*? What elements of the book did you find most interesting? Were there any aspects of the novel that you found surprising or unexpected?
2. Seaton Grove is based on an actual downtown Toronto neighbourhood, and references are made to area landmarks like Christie Pits and Honest Ed's department store. What techniques does the author use to create a vivid setting for the book, and how does the setting contribute narratively and thematically to the book?
3. The novel steadily builds to a suspenseful conclusion, but at its heart *Web of Angels* is a realistic depiction of a family and its place in the community. How does the author strike a balance between the dramatic and suspenseful aspects of the story?
4. "Family is all, it is everything, the one place where you have a place" (p. 58). Discuss this quotation in relation to the families depicted in *Web of Angels*. Explore the different shapes that the modern family can take in the novel, especially in multicultural and multi-generational terms.
5. The residents of Seaton Grove provide food and support following Heather's suicide, Sharon and the alters seek advice from their multiples chat room, and later their family works together to save Cathy and Madeline from a life of abuse. Discuss the way in which individuals finding strength within a community is a major theme of the novel.
6. Using a character with dissociative identity disorder as the main protagonist in a novel is an intriguing concept. How does the author make creative and respectful use of DID to further the story without resorting to exploitation?
7. "One minute you were inside, keeping things under control, and then all of a sudden you shot out. Boom. Like that. Crashing through the eyes" (pp. 43–44), Alec thinks. All of the alters have their own distinct character traits and behaviours. What are some of the techniques that the author uses to define and differentiate the alters and how do they contribute to the plot?
8. Comment on the INSIDE sections of the novel, in terms of both style and plot. How do they contribute to your understanding of Sharon's complex character and her abusive past?
9. What does the Overseer represent to Sharon and the other alters?

10. “No, not Rick or Debra. They define sane and rational. If anyone can get through this it would be them” (p. 71). A recurring theme in the novel is that the image one projects to others is not necessarily one’s true self. Discuss how this can apply not only to Sharon and the alters but to the hidden abusive nature of Rick and Debra.
  
11. If you have read Lilian Nattel’s previous novels, *The River Midnight* or *The Singing Fire*, what are your thoughts on how *Web of Angels* relates to them in terms of style and theme? Have you read any other books that might make an interesting comparison to this book?

## **Author Interview**

**Can you tell us how you became a writer? Are there any significant life experiences that have shaped your career as a writer?**

My oldest friend remembers me telling stories before either of us could read or write. But because my school library consisted of rather old books, I thought all authors were dead. I didn't realize until I was ten that there were living authors writing new books! As soon as I did, I knew that was what I wanted to do. My grade 6 teacher submitted one of my poems to a children's literary festival and her faith meant the world to me. I still think about her and the close relationship we had. My life took a number of detours, some surprising (I worked as an accountant until my first novel sold!), and others difficult. All of it impacted my work. However, creating my own family changed me forever. My neighbourhood, my home, my husband and my children have had a profound effect on my perceptions, how I write and what I choose to write about. As a start, that led me from writing historical fiction to setting *Web of Angels* here and now.

**What authors or books have been inspirational or influential on your work?**

The first book I ever read on my own was *The Three Billy Goats Gruff*. Ever since, I've loved folk tales, fairy tales and myths because these are the basic stories of human nature. Greed, jealousy, cruelty, bravery, perseverance, pity, love, ambition, gratitude, lies and disguise, divinity – it's all there, and, ultimately, at the bottom of it, as in Pandora's box, there is hope.

**If you weren't writing, what would you want to be doing for a living? What are some of your other passions in life?**

I love music but I couldn't sing for a living. Thankfully my children still like me to sing them lullabies. I skate and swim every week, though I'm no athlete: I didn't even learn to skate until a few years ago. I painted a wall mural in my house, but I'm not an artist. I'm a sewing machine nerd – can you make a living at that? I don't think so. I worked as an accountant, but that was so I could support writing without waitressing. I'm afraid there really isn't anything else for me.

**What inspired you to write *Web of Angels*? Did you have an interest in dissociative identity disorder before starting work on the book? Why did you decide to cast a character with DID as the protagonist in this type of story?**

I began with the choice of protagonist. At the time I was a mom with a baby and a preschooler at home, staying sane by hanging out in an internet chat room for people healing from difficult life

experiences. We commiserated about the terrible twos, joked around, and talked about the worst that humans can do. In the chat room I encountered the strangely wonderful way that many people there had survived early trauma, by developing multiple personalities. The reality was nothing like *Sybil*, which was most people's image of DID, mine included. I began to realize that I had a very special resource. Over time I was in contact with more than two dozen people with DID, some of them good friends. They came out to very few people because of all the misinformation about DID. Yet they were heroes who'd broken the cycle, quietly triumphing over adversity – and nobody knew it or even who they really were.

To find the story, I asked myself a question: what would a mom with multiple personalities see that nobody else could? The answer was that she could see someone like herself. The next question: what was that about? The answer was unavoidable: the majority of the people I'd known who had DID had been victims of the crime that underlies *Web of Angels*. Then on Christmas Eve in 2004, a friend sent me a link to a news story that haunted me. It formed the basis for the opening paragraph of *Web of Angels*.

**Describe your research process for the book. Did you seek out members in the DID community for background and reference? Were they supportive of the project? Did you speak with the police or any child welfare services?**

I came to know many people in the DID community in the most natural way, as I described above – we were friends and acquaintances. We spoke often, even daily at times, about everyday matters as well as deeply personal ones. That made my acquaintance with DID different from the clinical setting of a therapist, which is intimate but also restricted to the appointment time and place. It was also different from an interview setting, which has a question-and-answer structure. Because of that, and my passion as a mom who feels protective of all children, I felt called to this subject. When I'm friends with someone who is multiple, I'm friends not to one or two parts (a.k.a. alters or personalities), but to the whole, and I often got to know many of the alters. Everyone I talked to about *Web of Angels* was excited about it, and the friends who read drafts of the novel loved it. Their support helped me through the long process.

To write the police procedural aspect of the novel, I interviewed police officers at my local station and in the Child Exploitation Section of the Toronto Police Force. That section is known internationally for its work. One of those officers reviewed the section of the novel that describes police involvement – what a boost that she gave it a thumbs-up! I also spoke with counsellors, a contact at Children's Aid with experience in this area, and legal professionals. I was touched by the understanding, commitment and knowledge of everyone I interviewed.

**How did the process of writing this book differ from that of *The Singing Fire* or *The River Midnight*? How do you feel *Web of Angels* challenged you as a writer?**

Whether I like it or not, I am somehow compelled to challenge myself with each book. Maybe every writer is. I know that when I finish a novel, I am keen to take on something easier the next time, but I never do. *Web of Angels* didn't require the historical research of my previous novels, but it was an incredibly difficult novel to accomplish on many levels. First of all, it was demanding technically. As in my previous novels, I was writing about a world that would be foreign to most of my readers. Developing the alters vividly yet subtly and finding an approach to convey their internal world, while gripping the reader with a good story took many, many drafts and not a few tears of exasperation each time I went back to the drawing board again.

I had expected to write another historical novel, and in fact was working on one that simply wouldn't go anywhere. In my experience when that happens, it means there is another story percolating, and nothing else will do. In November of 2004, I was in Vancouver to talk about *The Singing Fire* at a book fair. Frustrated and boggled by writer's block, I sat on the bed of my hotel room with a notepad, just wanting to get back to the pure enjoyment of writing. Right then I ditched any preconception of what I ought to write or what the market wanted, and really opened up. What came to me was a mom with DID, and I wrote a few pages from several alters' viewpoints. After I got home, I couldn't get the characters out of my head. They had so much energy they dragged me along. I ended up with the quickest first draft I'd ever written, but it also became serious as I realized that I was taking on something that was bigger than me. And to get it right took years.

**One of the book's greatest strengths is its sense of place and the descriptive detail given to the neighbourhood of Seaton Grove, which shares some more than passing similarities to Toronto's Annex area. Why did you choose this neighbourhood for the setting of your novel, and what changes were necessary to make?**

I set the story in my own neighbourhood because that was the best way to convey that this is a story that could happen anywhere. I love where I live – I trust where I live – and I could infuse the novel with those common feelings, and the shake-up of discovering that a crime against children could be happening right in the heart of my own wonderful community. I also wanted to have the groundedness and realism of a strong sense of place to offset the exotic reputation of DID. So I used the features, feel and real history of my neighbourhood, but to give the story that “anywhere” feeling, I fictionalized it by using the original street names before this area was annexed by Toronto (which is never named for that reason), and I changed some locations for dramatic purposes. For example, Mrs. Brown is a real historical figure whose cottage was on

Markham Street. Though the cottage was replaced in the early twentieth century, I preserved it in the novel and moved it to the street where Cathy lives.

**What aspects of writing this book were the most difficult and which were the most personally rewarding?**

It's a good thing I felt called to **Web of Angels** because it's the most challenging, as well as rewarding, novel I've written. Technically it was a bear. Emotionally, it was draining, exciting, scary and uplifting. I was taking my work in a new direction. I had to learn how to write a contemporary novel – how to turn facts and my knowledge of real people into a story. I was taking on a subject that has been sensationalized and controversial, DID, and another subject that most people shy away from, child exploitation. It was risky in so many ways. But I also know it's the most important book I've written yet.

**As a writer, what are your working habits? Do you write only when inspired or do you sit down to work on a regular schedule?**

I don't rely on inspiration, or I'm afraid that my house would be very clean and my books non-existent! I show up at my desk and put in my time, and inspiration returns the favour by showing up unexpectedly and erratically. Having kids eliminated the luxury of getting up late and writing late. It was imperative to have a regular schedule because of their claims on my time. When they were small, they learned that Mommy goes upstairs to work. And when I came downstairs, I was theirs.

**What methods do you use to coax a difficult passage to life? Do you have any personal tricks to dealing with writer's block?**

I think hot baths are the cure-all for everything. If a hot bath fails, then I resort to ice cream and long walks, frequently at the same time. Eventually something just pops into my head.

**When starting a new project, do you prefer to start with a plot and then develop appropriate characters or do you like to have an established protagonist first? Have you ever been surprised by a character or plot that went off in an unplanned or unexpected direction?**

Oh, I prefer to start with a plot and sometimes I try, but those types of stories fall apart on me. My published books have always begun with a character that grabs me, shakes me, and demands my attention. The character tells me the story. I really must be half-deaf because it takes me many drafts to get it all. And yes, I'm frequently surprised.

**Has a review or profile ever changed your perspective on your work?**

I'll tell you one thing I've never forgotten. I met a woman at a reading who told me that after her adult daughter had died, she found comfort in reading my novels during the long, wakeful nights. I was humbled by that. It gave me perspective on the usual pressures that preoccupy me – they don't really matter as long as there's food on the table. What matters is love and connection. As a writer, I can't determine my own material success. But I can write truly, love fiercely and touch the fierce love of another person's heart. In that moment, no one is alone.

**What are you working on next?**

*Web of Angels* was a long project, and since finishing it I've had a surge of energy. I am considering several new books: another contemporary novel and two historical novels. The characters are talking and I'm cleaning out my ears. We'll find out whom I can hear the clearest!