

Ghostbread: Reader's Guide

1. Sonja describes the many people she observes as her family shifts from place to place: her cousin Tess, Petey, the Pepsi-Necklace girl, Rufus and Jewel, Mar, Carol Johnson, Sylvia Kostin, Annette Bellaqua, The Girls, Michelle Labella, Bill McCarthy, and many more. Which characters matter most in the memoir? Why?
2. The book is called Ghostbread. What is ghostbread? On what other occasions is bread mentioned in the book? Why do you suppose Livingston chose Ghostbread as her title?
3. The idea of shame is important to Ghostbread. Where and when does Sonja feel ashamed? What about other characters? Do shame and poverty go hand in hand in American society? Why/why not?
4. Discuss the role of race/ethnicity in this memoir. In what sections does skin color matter most? What, if anything, matters more than racial differences?
5. There is a widely accepted belief that parents want their children's lives to be better than their own. What do you think Sonja's mother wants for her? Is it possible for parents to be conflicted in this area? Why/why not?
6. Sonja's mother is a complex character. On page 5, Sonja says of her siblings and herself, "we were her handiwork." What does this mean? Is There a good parent? Why or why not?
7. In her epilogue, Livingston says "girls will lie down with sweet-talkers—not because they are stupid or weak, but because they are human beings with hearts and heads and dreams, and above all, hunger..." What does she mean by hunger? What are some examples of hunger in the book? Who feels it? How is it quenched?
8. In Part II, the family moves to a tiny dead-end street. What are some of the other places the family has inhabited? How does geography & landscape contribute to this memoir?
9. Corpus Christi Church is important to Sonja and her family. Describe their Catholicism. In what ways is Corpus Christi as unconventional as Sonja's family?
10. On page 164 Sonja learns her father's name. She starts her book by imagining her father meeting her mother, but fathers are conspicuously absent from most of the families she meets. Why is that? What do fathers mean to Sonja? Would she have been better off with one?
11. What is Sonja's view of sex? Where does it come from? Discuss the conflicts she feels as she gets older.
12. Ghostbread can be described as a "voice-driven" memoir. How would you describe the writer's voice? What is gained or lost by the use of such a voice?

13. Ghostbread consists of 122 short chapters which function like tiles in a mosaic. Why might Livingston have chosen this structure for a memoir? How might writing from memory have influenced the structure of a book?
14. In her preface, Livingston refers to the “pain and power and beauty of childhood.” Discuss ways in which this statement might be true for every childhood, not just impoverished children.
15. What emotions did you experience while reading Ghostbread?

Supplemental Questions

1. Livingston includes a preface to her memoir. What does she want you to know before you begin?
2. The memoir opens with the line, “I know where I came from.” What can you infer about her sense of self from the way Livingston addresses her beginnings?
3. On page 9, Sonja finds five dollars and discovered “what it felt like to swallow the sky.” What does this chapter tell us about the child? The mother? The family?
4. In admiring Stephanie’s toughness and bravery on pages 63 and 64, Sonja reveals something about herself. Discuss what it is and why it matters.
5. In chapters 43-46, we learn about Therese’s childhood. How might Therese’s early experiences have influenced the lives of Sonja and her siblings?
6. On page 76, Sonja reveals a secret: “I could control the wind.” Is she delusional? What role does Isis play for her? What other role models does Sonja look to?
7. On page 132, Sonja says: “In general, I’d become mouthy.” She gives examples of her “bad” behavior. Discuss what might have contributed to her actions.
8. In chapter 10, how does Sonja respond to her mother’s demands to jump? How does the author feel about the incident? What hints are provided?
9. On pages 193-195, Sonja objects to the emphasis placed on preparing kids for puberty, citing the example of a filmstrip, which “came out high-pitched and squeaky” to Sonja and her classmates. Why didn’t she relate to Janie? What is she saying in this section?
10. Sonja runs away from her mother after the Easter Vigil Mass and spends the night locked inside the church. Why does she hide? And why doesn’t she answer her mother when she hears her? What realization does Sonja come to as she arrives home on Easter morning?

11. What does Sonja mean on page 200 when she says Danny's affection "had begun to feel like sandpaper against my skin"? She liked him only a page earlier. What happened?
12. On page 210, Therese phones the hospital while Sonja listens. What does Therese learn? What is the significance of this scene?
13. Why is life after high school so challenging for Sonja to imagine? She seems to give up, and at one point, her PE teacher leans in and asks what she cares about—what does Sonja care about? How do you know?
14. On page 213, Sonja questions why a doctor seems to be encouraging her to get pregnant. What does she feel about his advice? Why?
15. The narrative closes on page 236 with Sonja graduating from East High. Describe her feelings as she crosses the stage. Is this a "happy" ending? Why/why not?