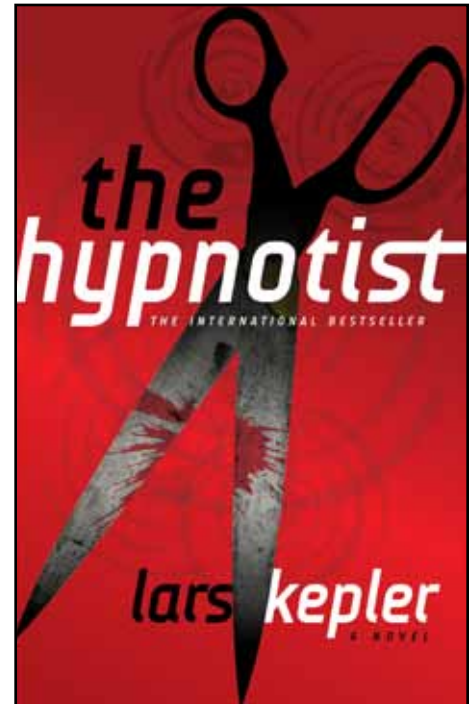


# Reading Group Gold

## *The Hypnotist* by Lars Kepler



Fifteen-year-old Josef Ek lies in a hospital bed, his body covered in countless knife wounds. He has survived a gruesome triple murder that took the lives of his parents and his little sister. In deep shock, he is the sole living witness to the crime. Desperate for information and sure that the killer is out for more blood, Detective Inspector Joona Linna opts for a risky route of interrogation: hypnosis. It's the only way to discover what the young victim saw.

Joona lures Dr. Erik Maria Bark to the case, despite the doctor's controversial reputation. It's the sort of work Erik has sworn he would never do again. At the pinnacle of his career as a psychotherapist, Erik made breakthrough progress with severely traumatized patients—until one patient's revelations went too far. Breaking his vow to abandon hypnosis, he now begins to probe Josef's memories, unleashing a terrifying chain of events that makes his own family the target of lethal vengeance.

Unfolding against the backdrop of Sweden's haunting landscapes, *The Hypnotist* marks the American debut of a mesmerizing thriller that has topped bestseller lists throughout Europe. Taking the genre to new heights, each chapter delivers a heart-stopping turn in a world where the mind may be the deadliest weapon.

The questions and discussion topics that follow are designed to enhance your reading of Lars Kepler's *The Hypnotist*. We hope they will enrich your experience as you explore this provocative novel.

### QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. At first, what did your instincts tell you about the murder of Josef's family? What were your initial theories?

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2. In chapter 17, Erik says that patients always tell the truth under hypnosis, but that their perception of what is true might be skewed. Did you believe that Josef's memories were accurate? Has your family ever disagreed about the accuracy of your memories, especially as they relate to blame and fate?
3. Lydia is just one of several powerful sadists featured in *The Hypnotist*. What is the source of her power over others? What separates fear from courage in this novel?
4. What accounts for the tremendous differences between Evelyn and Josef? What does their story tell us about nature and nurture, and about rage and the rational mind?
5. What was Erik hungry for when he began his flirtation with Maja? Would you have stayed married to him if you had been Simone?
6. Who is better at predicting human behavior: law enforcer Joona or therapist Erik?
7. How might the Bark family have been described from Benjamin's point of view? What forges the bond between him and his girlfriend, Aida? Are they refugees from a similar type of insecurity?
8. Discuss the structure of the novel. How was your reading affected by the short, cinematic chapters, told almost entirely in the present tense? How did the voice shift when Erik began narrating his own memories in the chapter called "Ten Years Ago," between chapters 74 and 75?
9. How did Kennet influence Simone's expectations of the world, and of her husband? How does Kennet's approach to fatherhood compare to Erik's?
10. Is Eva evil or simply self-obsessed? How did your opinion of her change throughout the novel?
11. The closing scene shows Erik's family transformed. Without the terrifying kidnapping, would they have ever learned to trust one another again? Why did the roots of their unhappiness run so deep?
12. How does the Scandinavian landscape of *The Hypnotist* (and of other bestselling crime novels from that part of the world) set the ideal tone for intense, suspenseful tales?
13. What does the novel say about the nature of cruelty? Where is the line drawn between mental illness (in some cases resulting from abuse) and a purely criminal mind? Ultimately, what did the killers in *The Hypnotist* want from their victims?
14. The identity of "Lars Kepler" was revealed before the U.S. publication of *The Hypnotist*. How did it affect your reading to know that these scenes were created by a husband-and-wife team?

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## PRAISE FOR *THE HYPNOTIST*

“The summer’s likeliest new Nordic hit.” —Janet Maslin, *The New York Times*

“Stieg Larsson had a good feel for characters, but it’s his fellow Swede Kepler who has a direct line to a very dark place in the human soul.” —Lev Grossman, *Time*

“Belongs on every international crime fan’s reading list.” —Jessica Moyer, *Booklist*

“The brutal slaying of gambling addict Anders Ek, his wife, and his younger daughter propels this outstanding thriller debut . . . A well-integrated subplot involving a gang of terrifying boys and girls adds to the suspense. Readers will look forward to seeing more of Linna in what one hopes will be a long series.” —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“This is the thriller that’s taking Europe by storm . . . It might just be the next *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* . . . Ferocious, visceral storytelling that wraps you in a cloak of darkness which almost blots out the light, but still feeds the imagination. It’s stunning.” —*The Daily Mail*

“Crime writing at its most devilishly involving.” —*Marie Claire* (UK)

“Kepler [brings] a sulphurous whiff of Hannibal Lecter to this case . . . It’s a pulse-pounding debut that is already a native smash.” —Christopher Fowler, *Financial Times*

“*The Hypnotist* is a rare beast: a Swedish thriller on a high international level with a smart, effective and surprising plot. The narrative has a skilful, refined, pulsating drive and the writing is sharp, convincing and multilayered.” —*Kristianstadsbladet* (Sweden)

“*The Hypnotist* is—yes—impossible to put down. *The Hypnotist* is—yes—ingeniously put together, like a Swiss watch. *The Hypnotist* is—YES!—fabulously entertaining, even gruesomely so. But it is also a serious meditation on evil, human weakness, the infinity of the mind, and the capriciousness of fate. My wife stole it from me before I was finished reading it and tore through it. Then I stole it back, to my great pleasure!” —Colin Harrison, author of *The Finder*

“Soon there will be Stieg Larsson crime fiction people and Lars Kepler crime fiction people. I’m henceforth in the latter camp. *The Hypnotist* is every bit the equal of the Millennium Trilogy—riveting narrative momentum, fascinatingly grisly forensics, existential Nordic dread. But there’s more: superior prose, no cartoony characters, and beneath all the noir, plenty of old-fashioned heart.” —Kurt Andersen, author of *Heyday*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LARS KEPLER is a pseudonym for a literary couple who live in Sweden.

Reading group guide written by Amy Clements/The Wordshop