

SANDRA BLOCK

"I am a forever-fan of the Zoe Goldman series and will read anything Sandra Block writes. You should too."

LISA SCOTTOLINE, *New York Times* bestselling author



THE SECRET ROOM

A N O V E L

THE SECRET ROOM



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READING GROUP GUIDE

Dear Reader,

Have you ever asked yourself: Who am I?

Some people spend years trying to find themselves, through meditation, pilgrimages, or, like Zoe Goldman, therapy.

The question of self isn't a simple one for Zoe. As Sofia loves to remind her, Zoe Goldman isn't even her original name. Her "real" name is Tanya Vallano, which was changed (unbeknownst to her) after she was adopted. And Zoe can be different versions of herself, on and off medication. When she's off medication, her ADHD and anxiety throw her into self-doubt and disconnected thinking. But she also becomes a more keen observer of life, with an unfiltered view. Which one is the "real" Zoe?

As for her patient Andre, he has multiple selves as well. His diagnosis of schizophrenia literally means "split personality." Before his mother dies, he is a straight-A chess champion and comics-loving student. With his apparent psychosis, he

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turns into a delusional, violent prisoner who tries to kill his father and won't take off his red gloves. His father Abraham also looms large in the book. He may be a congenial, widowed accountant or the devil that Andre sees, full of dangerous lies.

In truth, none of us are who we seem to be. We all wear masks at times, to protect ourselves or to hide our lesser selves. The woman in the secret room feels like her true self only with her beloved Professor. But her true self may just be someone he has manipulated and molded.

Of all the characters, Sofia seems the most straightforward: an obvious psychopath. But as the story develops, even this isn't clear. She claims to be reformed now, to have found God. In fact, she is asking Zoe—her former nemesis—for forgiveness. Her brother Jack doubts her, but Zoe isn't so sure. After all, the psychiatric profession exists to help people change. Maybe she should trust Sofia now. Maybe a psychopath really can change.

Who is the real Zoe? Who is the real Andre? Who is the real Sofia?

Who is the real you?

Hopefully, after reading *The Secret Room*, you will have all the answers...

Happy reading, everyone!



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READER QUESTIONS

1. Did you guess the identity of the woman in the secret room? Did you feel sorry for her?
2. The woman in the secret room has an unhealthy obsession with her teacher, “the Professor.” Have you ever felt that way about someone? Could you understand how she felt?
3. The concept of a room holds many meanings. There is the physical room, but also rooms within our psyches. Freud might say we have hidden rooms inside our minds that emerge in dreams or unconscious actions. Discuss.
4. Do you have a physical room that you love, where you feel most yourself?
5. Aubrey carries physical and emotional scars from her guilt and pain. Do you feel sorry for Aubrey? Do you understand her motivation?
6. Do you know anyone with ADHD or anxiety? Do Zoe’s struggles seem realistic? Do you think reading fictional

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accounts can help you understand someone's real-life struggles?

7. Do you think someone with Zoe's mental issues should be practicing psychiatry? Could it make her a more empathetic—and better—psychiatrist?
8. Andre fights delusions and hallucinations for most of the book. Did you guess that the source of his problems could be physical rather than mental?
9. Andre talks about “doubles,” and there are multiple characters with dual identities. His father himself has a double. Can you describe some others?
10. Did you guess who was texting and tormenting Zoe throughout the book? Do you think this character had a valid reason for this?
11. Zoe feels guilty and incompetent when her patients keep dying. Have you ever felt this way during your work?
12. Zoe has a certain “lemon” that she keeps secret during the book. Should she have told Mike about it earlier?
13. Sofia claims she has changed, that she is trying to follow God and become a better person. Do you believe her? Should Zoe have forgiven her?
14. Zoe's brother Scotty has his share of troubles during the book, and in the end considers moving away from Buffalo. Did your siblings ever go through hard times while growing up? Were you able to help them?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sandra Block graduated from college at Harvard, then returned to her native land of Buffalo, New York, for medical training and never left. She is a practicing neurologist and proud Sabres fan and lives at home with her family and Delilah, her impetuous yellow lab. She has been published in both medical and poetry journals. *The Secret Room* is her third novel.

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