

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Unfinished Yawn

A horror short story by C.R. Lang

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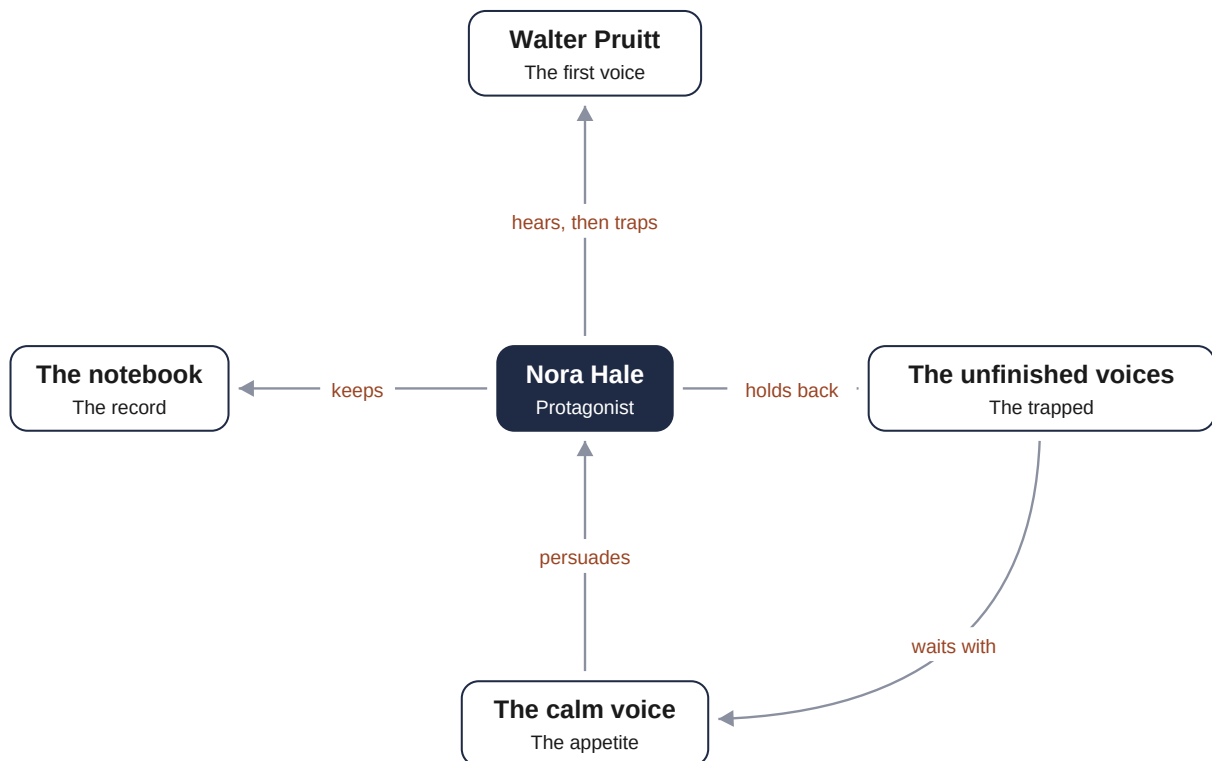
About the story

A night-shift proofreader discovers that at the top of every yawn she hears a stranger's last thought, just before they vanish. Trying to stop the yawns only makes things worse.

This guide assumes everyone has finished the story, so it discusses the ending.

Character map

The main character is in the dark box. Arrows show who acts on whom.



Who's who

Nora Hale (Protagonist). Six years on night shifts, exhausted, and the only one who can hear the vanishing.

Walter Pruitt (The first voice). Vanished from his kitchen in Duluth with the stove still on. His thought gets trapped mid-sentence.

The unfinished voices (The trapped). Hundreds of small, interrupted last thoughts pressing behind Nora's teeth.

The calm voice (The appetite). Whole, kind and clear. It speaks directly to Nora and tells her she can stop holding it.

The notebook (The record). Nora's list of every last thought she heard.

Themes to look for

Exhaustion. Nora's lack of sleep is both the cause of the yawns and the cost of fighting them.

Witnessing. Nora writes down the last thoughts because 'someone had to remember them.' What do we owe the people we cannot save?

The smallness of last thoughts. No one thinks about dying at the end. They think about stoves, dogs and crosswords.

Good intentions gone wrong. Stopping the yawns doesn't save anyone. It traps them.

Discussion questions

- 1 Why does Nora find the ordinariness of the last thoughts harder to bear than terror would be?
- 2 Other passengers on the bus see the empty seat and look away. What is the story saying about how people handle what they cannot explain?
- 3 Nora realizes she 'had not been saving anyone. She had been keeping them.' How does this change your view of her efforts?
- 4 What is the 'calm voice' at the end? A victim, the hunger itself, or something else?
- 5 How does the story make a yawn, something everyone does, frightening?
- 6 Nora's own last thought is 'I should have let myself sleep.' What does that line mean on more than one level?
- 7 Why do you think she keeps the notebook, and why does the story end on it?
- 8 Does Nora have any real choice in this story? Where, if anywhere, could she have changed her fate?

Craft corner

For writers in the group: two ways to look at how the story is built.

Motif. Track the repeated phrases ('Did I leave the stove on?'). How does repetition build dread?

Twist ending. Did you expect Nora to be taken? Look back for where the story hinted at it.

Try this together

Each person writes an ordinary thought they had today on a slip of paper, unsigned. Read them aloud. Talk about what the slips reveal about the people in the room, and why Nora found these small thoughts so heartbreaking.

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