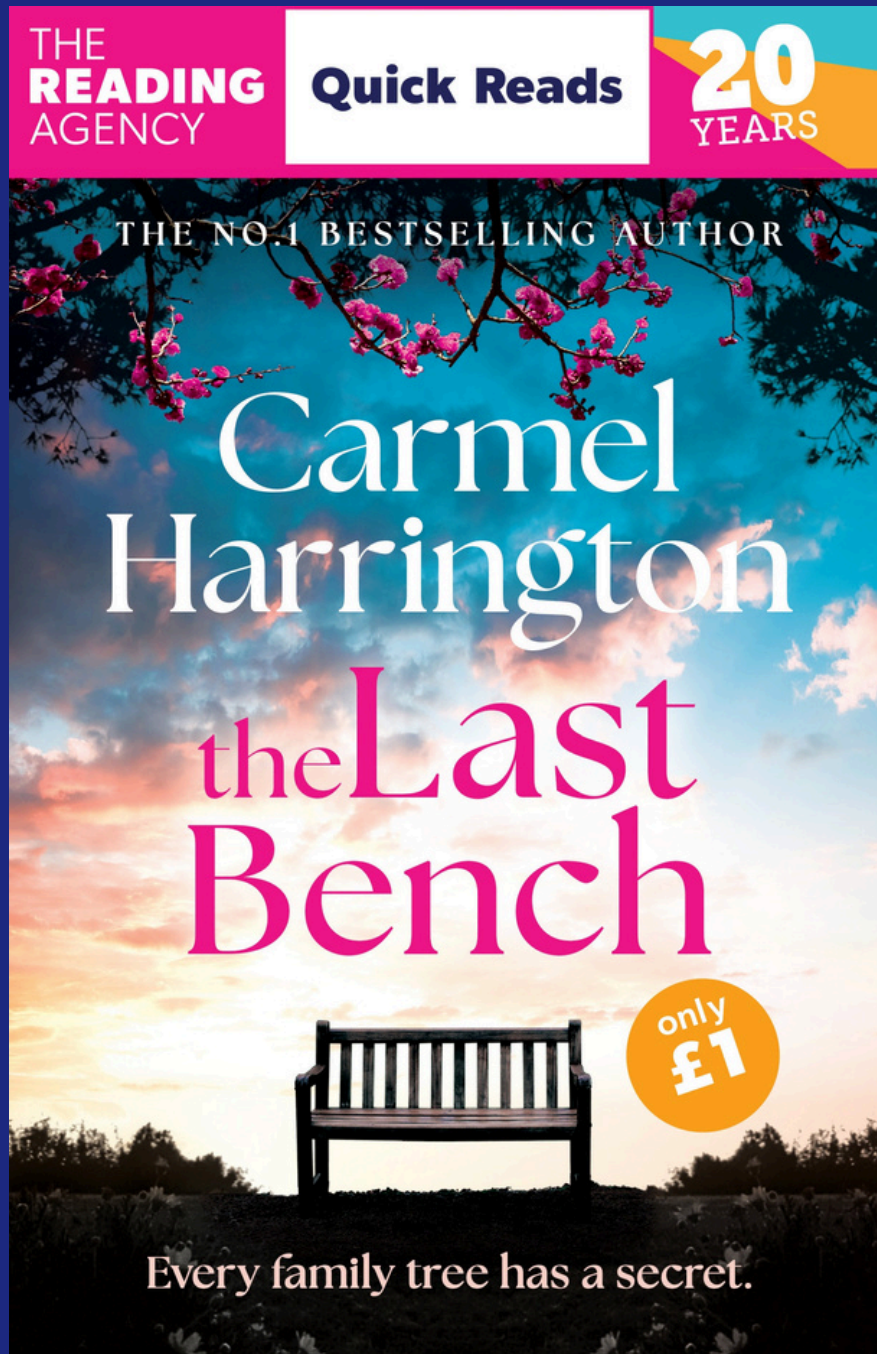


THE
READING
AGENCY

Discussion Guide



2026 Quick Reads

The Last Bench
by Carmel Harrington

About the author

Carmel Harrington is an international bestseller of thirteen novels from County Wexford, where she resides with her husband, Roger, their children, Amelia and Nate, and their beloved rescue dog, George Bailey. Her last novel, *THE STOLEN CHILD*, was a Number One bestseller and was named a Sunday Times Best Crime Fiction of the Year, describing it as 'Endlessly surprising. This complex novel requires faultless plotting, and Harrington pulls it off with consummate ease.'

Carmel's debut was a multi-award-winning novel, and several of her other books have been shortlisted for an Irish Book Award. She frequently features on Irish television and radio and has been a guest speaker at literary events in Ireland, the UK, and the USA.



Additionally, she served as Chair of the Wexford Literary Festival for three years. Carmel's emotional and gripping storytelling, with relatable characters and twisting plots, has captured readers' hearts worldwide. Her thrillers and family dramas including *THE LIGHTHOUSE SECRET*, *THE GIRL FROM DONEGAL*, *A MOTHER'S HEART*, and *THE MOON OVER KILMORE QUAY*, and have been Irish Times, USA Today, and Kindle bestsellers.

Discussion Questions

NOW

One - Vega

1. What does the opening scene reveal about Vega's personality and her work?
Think about how she behaves, what she notices, and how she talks to her editor.
2. How does the Carrigfoyle setting shape the mood of the beginning?
Consider what the place looks like and how it makes Vega feel.
3. Why do you think Vega is drawn to the story of addiction in rural communities?
Look at her personal reactions, thoughts, and questions.
4. What does her relationship with her editor, Kieran, seem like?
Notice whether they talk formally, warmly, or like friends.
5. What expectations do you have for her upcoming interview with the Davises?
Think about what Vega hopes to learn and why the family is important to the story.

NOW

Two - Anne

1. Why is John so anxious about doing the interview?
Think about past decisions they made, his fear of revealing too much, and his desire to protect their privacy.

2. How does Anne's attitude differ from John's in this scene?

Consider her determination, her calmness, and her belief that they must face potential trouble.

3. What impression does Vega make when she arrives?

Think about her appearance, confidence, warmth, and how Anne and John react to her.

4. Why do Anne and John decide to talk to Vega despite vowing never to give interviews?

Look for clues about their need to control the story and their fear of what Vega might already know.

5. How does this scene foreshadow the emotional difficulty of the interview ahead?

Think about John turning away, Anne's determination, and the mention of painful memories from 1992.

THEN

Three - Anne

1. What does Anne's behaviour in this scene reveal about her emotional state?

Think about her trembling hands, the whisky, and how determined she is to hide her fear.

2. How does John's reaction show the strength of their relationship?

Consider how quickly he senses something is wrong, and how he trusts her even when shocked.

4. Why do you think Anne chose not to tell John her plan beforehand?

Think about whether she believed he would stop her, or whether she felt she had no other choice.

5. What does the reveal of Hinges in the wheelbarrow show about Anne's character?

Think about her bravery, desperation, or need for control after feeling powerless for so long.

6. How does the writer build tension in the scene from the moment John arrives?

Look at pacing, dialogue, the gradual reveal, and the contrast between Anne's calmness and John's shock.

THEN

Four - John

1. What does John's reaction to seeing Hinges reveal about his emotional state?

Think about his physical reactions and how he tries to stay calm.

2. How does Anne describe her planning process, and what does this reveal about her character?

Consider her detailed notebook, careful observations, and the pride she shows.

3. What surprises John most about Anne's actions, and why?

Think about how well he believed he knew her, and how unimaginable this plan is to him.

4. How does the writer use the contrast between Anne's calmness and John's panic to build tension?

Look at their dialogue, body language, and the emotional shift between them.

5. Why is John afraid to ask what Anne plans to do next—and why must he ask anyway?

Think about fear, morality, the past trauma with Hinges, and the need to know what comes next.

NOW

Five - John

1. What does Vega's reaction to the garden and maze reveal about her personality?

Think about her excitement, her emotional response, and how openly she expresses admiration.

2. How do Anne and John each respond to Vega's praise, and what does this show about their characters?

Consider John's mixture of embarrassment and pride, and Anne's willingness to share memories.

3. What does the blossom maze symbolise for Anne and John?

Think about the years it took to build, the connection to 1998, and how it represents love, grief, and healing.

4. How does the writer use descriptions of the garden to reflect Anne and John's relationship?

Look at teamwork, shared history, and moments of tenderness, like John offering his arm or kissing her hair.

5. Why is Vega's discovery of the "first bench" an important moment in this scene?

Think about the emotional significance of the bench, its connection to John and Anne's past, and how it begins to build trust between the three characters.

NOW

Six - Vega

1. What does Vega notice about Anne and John that makes her begin to feel suspicious?

Think about the exact timeline of the maze, John's reaction to selling, and the small details she files away.

2. How does the story of Anne and John's childhood kiss shape our understanding of their marriage?

Consider what it reveals about their bond, shared history, and how long their love has lasted.

3. Why is the slurry tank rescue such an important memory for them?

Think about heroism, vulnerability, and how it becomes part of their "origin story" as a couple.

4. How do Anne and John describe the "secret" to their long marriage—and what hints of pain lie beneath their words?

Look at Anne mentioning heartbreak, John referencing "dark moments," and how these hints create tension.

5. Why does Vega feel both admiration and suspicion at the same time during this scene?

Think about the warmth of their love story contrasted with the sense that something is being hidden from her.

THEN

Seven - Anne

1. Why does Anne believe getting a confession from Hinges will help heal their family?

Think about her feelings of being "a shell," Michael leaving, and her belief that confronting Hinges is the only way to move forward.

2. How does John react to Anne's plan, and what does this reveal about his fears and values?

Consider his shock, his morality ("that's not who we are"), and his fear of violence.

3. How does the writer show Anne's internal conflict about who she has become?

Look at her trembling hands, her admission of being scared of herself, and her obsession with planning.

4. What role does their shared grief (especially the memory of 1992) play in motivating their actions now?

Think about the barbecue memory, the shift from six to five, and how unresolved trauma shapes their decisions.

5. Why does John ultimately agree to go along with Anne's plan, even though he believes it is dangerous and wrong?

Consider love, loyalty, inevitability ("what choice do I have?"), and his desire to protect Anne, physically and emotionally.

THEN

Eight - John

1. What motivates John and Anne's actions?

Consider how grief, fear, or a desire for justice / vengeance, shape their behaviour. Which emotions seem to be driving each of them most strongly?

2. How does the author build tension in the scene?

Look at the details: Hinges in a wheelbarrow, the camcorder, the isolated house.

3. What does Hinges reveal about himself through his speech and behaviour?

Think about how he jokes, threatens, bargains, and dismisses responsibility. What do his reactions to captivity and the way he talks about drugs and young clients, tell you about his character?

4. How does John's imagined violence vs. his restraint shape your perception of him?

When John imagines hitting Hinges, what does that moment reveal about his mental state?

NOW

Nine - Anne

1. How does the conversation about the past deepen our understanding of Anne and John?

What do their memories reveal about their personalities and their life together?

2. Why does Anne feel like she's "standing on the edge of an abyss"?

What difficult topic are they avoiding and why is it hard for her?

3. What role does Vega play in this scene?

How does her presence influence what Anne and John choose to share?

4. Describe the contrast between the peaceful setting and Anne's inner feelings.

What effect does the birdsong and calm environment have on the tension?

5. What does Anne's worry about "secrets" suggest about the interview?

Why might she fear that some truths could come out?

NOW

Ten - Vega

1. How does the memory of the Japanese Garden shape our understanding of the family?
What does this story show about their closeness and their way of loving each other?
2. What does the blossom-throwing memory reveal about Margaret's personality?
How do her reactions, interests, and imagination come through in the story?
3. Why is Vega so moved by John and Anne's bond?
What does she observe in the way they look at each other and share memories?
4. How does the joy of the family memory contrast with the reason for the interview?
How does this happy scene make the later tragedy feel heavier?
5. What internal conflict is Vega experiencing as she listens?
What motivates her to continue?

NOW

Eleven - John

1. How does the setting of the garden and treehouse affect Margaret's story?
Why do you think the author chose a beautiful, peaceful setting for this conversation?
2. How does Anne express her grief compared to John?
Do you notice guilt, silence, or avoidance in either of them?
3. What role does the Irish Leaving Certificate play in Margaret's story?
How much pressure was Margaret under, and where did it come from?
4. Why is Vega's question about Hinges such a turning point in the scene?
How does the mood shift when Hinges is mentioned?

THEN

Twelve - Anne

1. What drives Anne to confront Hinges so directly in this scene?
Is Anne seeking justice, truth, closure, or something else?
2. How does Hinges' behaviour intensify the tension and danger of the encounter?
Which of his actions or words felt most threatening, and why?
3. Why does John ultimately decide that Hinges must be let go?
Do you agree with John's reasoning, or would you have chosen differently?
4. What emotional shift happens for Anne by the end of the chapter?
What makes Anne realise she cannot continue down this path?

NOW

Thirteen - Vega

1. What new doubts or suspicions begin to form in Vega's mind during this conversation?
Which moments or contradictions make Vega start to question Anne and John's story?
2. How does the courtroom experience deepen our understanding of Anne and John's grief?
What details from the trial show how lasting and shared their trauma is?

3. Why is Anne's use of the past tense about Hinges significant?

What might Anne be revealing, intentionally or not, through her choice of words?

4. What is the importance of the date Anne gives for starting the garden?

Why does that specific date feel unsettling or suspicious to Vega?

THEN

Fourteen - John

1. How does John's approach to Hinges change in this scene?

What tactics does John use to gain control of the situation?

2. What does Hinges' response to the hidden camera reveal about his character?

How does his attitude shift once he realises he has real consequences to fear?

3. Do Anne and John cross a moral line by threatening Hinges with the recording?

Is this justice, self-protection, or something else?

4. How does the promise that Hinges will "relocate to Spain" affect the chapter ending?

Does this feel like a resolution, or does it raise new doubts?

THEN

Fifteen - Anne

1. How does the calm domestic routine after Hinges' release affect the tension of the chapter?

Why do you think the author focuses on ordinary family plans?

2. What does John's dream about Margaret and the cherry blossoms represent?

How does this dream show John's hopes for healing?

3. In what ways has Anne changed since confronting Hinges?

Why does Anne feel "stronger," even though she didn't get the outcome she wanted?

4. Why is Hinges' return at the end of the chapter so effective as a cliffhanger?

What fears does this final line trigger for you as a reader?

NOW

Sixteen - Anne

1. What does Margaret's tree symbolise at this point in the story?

How has the meaning of the tree changed from grief to growth?

2. Why are the small inconsistencies in Anne and John's story important?

What do these slips suggest about memory, truth, or secrecy?

3. How does the creation of the garden help Anne and John survive their loss?

What role does physical work and routine play in their healing?

4. What is your reaction to the line "Trouble had not met them on the road this time"?

Does this feel like relief, denial, or a warning?

NOW

Seventeen - Vega

1. How does Luka's role in Vega's life contrast with Anne and John's relationship?

What does Luka represent for Vega emotionally?

2. Why does Vega feel unsettled after leaving John and Anne?

What clues suggest that something is not adding up?

3. How does Luka's comment about Hinges trigger Vega's realisation?

What connection suddenly becomes clear to Vega?

4. Why does the chapter end with Vega whispering "Damn it, Anne and John"?

What do you think Vega has just discovered?

THEN

Eighteen - Anne

1. How does the power dynamic shift during Anne's confrontation with Hinges?

At what moment does control begin to move away from Hinges?

2. What role does Michael's sudden appearance play in the scene?

How does Michael's arrival change the outcome?

3. How does the violence in this chapter affect your understanding of Anne and John's choices?

Do their earlier decisions feel justified or tragic in light of this moment?

4. Why is the final line "Hinges would never move again" so impactful?

What emotions does this ending leave you with?

THEN

Nineteen - John

1. How do Anne and John justify burying Hinges themselves instead of calling the authorities?

Why do they decide not to involve the gardaí?

2. What role does John's memory of Margaret play while he digs the hole?

How does thinking about Margaret help him cope with what he's doing?

3. How does this chapter explore the idea of moral limits and revenge?

Do you think what they did was right or wrong? Why?

4. How does the final act of planting the blossom tree over Hinges' grave symbolise the family's emotions?

What does the tree represent after everything that has happened?

NOW

Twenty - Anne

1. Why does Vega decide not to include Anne and John in her article about drugs?

Why did Vega protect Anne and John from the story?

2. How do Anne and John feel about the legacy of the blossom garden?

Why is the garden so important to them?

3. What does Vega mean when she says, "Karma has no menu, but you get served what you deserve"?

What does Vega think happened to Hinges?

4. How do Anne and John's reactions to Vega reflect their personalities and values?

What do their reactions tell us about who they are?

5. How does the chapter show healing and hope after trauma?

What gives Anne and John hope for the future?