

## ***Dare Me* Reading Group Guide**

I'll start out with a confession: I was never a cheerleader. In high school, I was distinctly the school newspaper type.

But somehow, all these years later, I have found myself writing a novel set firmly in the dark heart of a high school cheerleading squad. Of course, the cheerleader of my era—all pom-poms and ponytails and a few high kicks—bears little resemblance to the cheerleader of today. Battle-hardened by gymnastics training and a sneaky kind of girl power, the cheerleader of 2012 is a hardcore warrior, putting herself at risk and devoting everything to an increasingly dangerous, thrilling experience.

So, in doing the research for the book, what I found was a fundamental and fascinating contradiction. Cheerleading remains the most quintessential experience of all-American girlness. At the same time, however, it's this rich terrain on which all the big emotions and dramas of teen girlhood are enacted: ambition, competitiveness, aggression, rivalries, fear, loyalty, achievement, and power.

As I wrote the book, a whole world emerged for me, one filled with confusion, mystery, longing, the fight for power and dominance. In short: high school, times ten, which is already life times ten.

—*Megan Abbott*

## Questions:

1. *Dare Me* explores the world of high school cheerleading, which has become more competitive and dangerous in recent years. What do you think its appeal for Addy and the other girls is?
2. Addy and Beth are, or were, very close friends. What do you think their connection is? How does their personal history impact what happens in the novel?
3. We see very little of Addy and Beth's parents. Do you think their parents' role in their lives affects their behavior?
4. While Addy notes that Coach's life seems perfect—a loving husband, beautiful young daughter, lovely home all her own—Coach seems unhappy. What is missing for her?
5. Coach is an important mentor in Addy's life, but she also has questionable boundaries. What do you think of Coach's behavior towards her?
6. Beth accuses Coach of many things, ranging from being a bad coach to a bad influence to a criminal. To what degree are her charges founded or unfounded?
7. The male characters in *Dare Me*—Will, Matt, the other guardsmen—appear on the fringes of the story yet exert a huge impact on what happens. What is the place of men and boys in the world of *Dare Me*? Does that make us more or less sympathetic to them?
8. Beth may be seen as a quintessential “mean girl,” but she can also be seen as loyal, fiercely protective of Addy, and sometimes an effective leader. How do you view her? What do you think drives her behavior throughout the book?

9. There are repeated references to Beth and Addy's experience at cheer camp the previous summer, when Addy became friends with another girl, Casey. Why does the experience keep re-emerging? To what extent did it impact their friendship?
10. In many ways, Addy is caught between two powerful "leaders"—Beth and Coach. Where does she land in the end? And is it a good place?
11. In some ways, *Dare Me* is a book about power, how to get it and how to hold it. But is it also about *female* power or does power operate among males in the same way?
12. Did you play a sport in high school or were you a cheerleader? If so, did you identify with the way it consumes the characters?
13. Is there something specific about adolescence that creates friendships as intense as Beth and Addy's? Did you have friendships like that, or witness them, in high school?