

Discussion Guide for Book Groups

I wouldn't want a list of questions—I'd trust that our group would be able to generate plenty of those on our own—I'd want *answers*, from the author herself, a stash of behind-the-scenes truths to use as a springboard for discussion. I mean, I'd be fine for a while debating and interpreting and appreciating what is supposedly subjective, but then the desire for absolute resolution/clarity would come over me, as it almost always does when talking about a book or movie, and I'd really just want to pull the source from the wings to set everything straight à la Woody Allen and Marshall McLuhan in *Annie Hall*. I would also want some perspective from the other folks who touched and shaped the book. I'd maybe—depending on the dynamic of the night—be open to an activity prompted by the book but only if it didn't feel forced like those dreaded break-into-a-small-group-and-put-on-a-skit type endeavors always do.

Snack suggestions would be fun. I'd want it to be not just a book club meeting, but a happening, a culmination, a bursting. I'd want the members to walk away after their good-byes feeling the night had mattered in some way, to feel contemplative and contented, to feel psyched driving home, but to also be okay when that energized feeling dissipates—one can imagine that even adrenaline-rushed revolutionaries wake up at dawn to a sink full of dishes and videos they need to return—and to know that the gathering was still very much worth something. I'd want there to be purple flowers.

Table 1

STASH OF TRUTHS

It was intentional that the book begins with Amy and ends with You. My agent, Amy Rennert (fittingly named), suggested the former, and writer pal John Green suggested the latter.

There were five drafts of the book. I wrote the book accordion style, adding and deleting entries as I went along. I wrote what I felt compelled to write, then gave it a title and filed it accordingly; I never even thought to write it in alphabetical order or to pay attention to the number of entries under each letter. The two parts of the book that remained unchanged from first draft to final book were the actual bookends of the book, the Foreword and the “You” entry.

The most difficult entry to write was “Tears.” I originally titled it “Crying” but upon cataloging it, realized that the passage would be too jarring placed early in the book. This was one of the few instances where I interfered with leaving the flow of the book to chance; by and large I liked the idea that the alphabetical device created the narrative.

The very last thing I wrote was the entry that appears on the back cover, “Book, standing in the bookstore holding a.” I e-mailed the passage to my editor on October 2, 2004, exactly a year to the day from when I found out the book would be published.

There is only one illustration—that of a radish—in the entire “Evolution of this Moment” section. This was my attempt at symbolism. I had written about a radish memory (page 58) that resurfaced in my mind throughout my life. When I later read Montaigne's passage (as quoted on page 26), a bulb went off (so to speak), and I took it as an important clue in my scavenger hunt/gestation stage when I was starting this project, that it was indeed valid to write about, or to even be focused on, such ordinary matters, and soon thereafter (in book time, one page), arrived at the encyclopedia concept and title.

I tried to chronicle a typical 21st-century life. I like that there is an umbrella on the cover. I think the spine looks really cool.

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Table 1 (continued)

The word *ordinary* feels good and also accurate to me, and I'd side with its synonyms *everyday* and *familiar*. Yep, I really took the polygraph exam (page 201). Yep, I personally respond to every e-mail (page xiv). Yep, I baked a pie for the hundredth person (page 167), and will do it again for the paperback readers. Now that I've written this book, it's funny for me to simply see the word *encyclopedia* used in other contexts (e.g., *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, or *Encyclopedia of Household Appliances*), funny in a good way, like I'm cousins with the word, like maybe how you feel when you see the name of your college or favorite obscure band mentioned in an article—*oh, that's me, that's my college/that's my band*. I wonder if I'll always feel this encyclopedia affinity, or if it will wear off.

Table 2

COMMENTS FROM THOSE WHO SHAPED THE BOOK

Jeffrey Middleton, illustrator: The radish (page 26) was the first illustration I drew. I placed it on the table, and the leaves wilted quickly. It was like one of those old, fast-motion science films, watching those leaves wilt. About the peppers (page 161)—I suppose that I had never really thought about the taste difference between red and green peppers. But the two that are illustrated in the book, I ate them after drawing them, and they did indeed taste different. Or was that because I had read the entry? The streetlight (page 39) feels peaceful to me. Unlike the semi-cab illustration (page 48), it is an illustration born of peaceful karma.

Dan Rembert, jacket designer: The paperback cover is a close adaptation of the original hardcover jacket, which was designed to be a good bit shorter than the actual height of the book. A

partial dust jacket like this is often called a “bellyband”; it's usually about two inches wide and wraps around the middle of the book, and it normally requires a spot of glue to keep it securely in place during shipment, and later, when on display. This glue is often referred to as “the snot” by the people who manufacture books. Fortunately for Amy, her book's bellyband comfortably occupied the entire lower two thirds of the book and therefore did not require the use of snot.

Table 3

ACTIVITIES TO CONSIDER

Do an installment of the Change Project in your neighborhood (page 52).

Create a chart of what your childhood tasted like (page 60).

Contest a parking ticket on the grounds of karma (page 155).

Create a chart of new things you've tried/been into (page 189).

Fill out the X-marks-the-spot questionnaire (page 216).

Write your own encyclopedia entries.

Table 4

SNACK IDEAS

- ▶ Swiss Cheese Appetizers (recipe on page 60)
- ▶ Wine (see back flap)
- ▶ Butterscotch candy
- ▶ Pie

To set up an author speaker phone appearance for your book group or organization, please visit the Book Groups section of encyclopediaofanordinarylife.com.