

Book club questions

The Plain Language of Love and Loss: A Quaker Memoir

by Beth Taylor

1. There's no doubt that there are aspects of this book that are very sad. What feeling did you ultimately take away from this book?
2. What does the opening chapter evoke? How do Beth's memories of her mother deepen by finding the note? How is "The Note" a motive for writing the memoir?
3. What values shaped Bryn Gweled as a community? How do they contrast to our concept of the American family and community of the 1960s? Now?
4. Were there things that were unique to Beth's childhood (aside from the suicide of her brother)?
5. How would you characterize Beth's relationship with each of her parents?
6. How did your perception of Beth's father evolve through the course of the memoir? At what points does it change?
7. How did your perception of Geoff's story evolve throughout the course of the memoir? At what points does it change?
8. How would you characterize Quakerism as it is rendered in the memoir? Did the Quaker faith empower or restrict the Taylor children/adults—or both?
9. Pacifism is a central tenet of Quakerism. At what moments in the memoir do events show the practice to be tougher than the theory?
10. Family legacy is a key theme in this memoir. How does it seem to affect Geoff, his father, his mother, Beth, and Daphne?
11. Why, and how, did the Vietnam War get entangled in the story of Geoff?
12. Suicides can create ripple effects for years. The effect on Beth's life traveled at least to the next generation. Talk about how Geoff's suicide affected each member of the family differently, at the time of his death and in later years. What are their various coping mechanisms?
13. Think about Beth's first long-term relationship with a man and think about the man she married. The Rolling Stones sang, "You can't always get what you want/But if you try sometimes, well you just might find/You get what you need." Did Beth marry the man she needed?

14. How would you characterize Beth's understanding of faith in the last chapter? What do you think Flannery O'Connor meant when she said Christ was "the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of [one's] mind"?

15. How would you characterize Beth as a narrator? Does your perception of her change at different stages of her life?

16. Look at the Acknowledgements Page. What was the effect of hearing various points of view about what happened to Geoff?

17. How is this memoir a study in the problem of truth?

18. What remains unspoken here? In selecting the information for this particular story in her life, what kinds of stories and information does it seem Beth left out?

19. Beth published this book after the death of her parents. Do you think she could have published it while they were alive? If so, how do you think each would have reacted to Beth's sharing this story?

20. Good memoirs often rekindle your own personal memories. What memories were sparked for you? How does your own upbringing and adulthood correspond to Beth's?

21. How do you read the final paragraph? Does it make sense in your own life?