

Joy For Beginners

Book Club Discussion Questions

1. “The second she touched the dough it seemed to latch on to her skin, clinging to her hands, greedy and thick, webbing her fingers. She tried to pull back, but the dough came with her, stretching off the counter, as unyielding as chewing gum. Clay was nothing like this.”

Daria tells Henry that she works with clay because she likes to play in the mud. Later we learn that her mother loved to bake bread. Why has Daria embraced working with clay, yet maintained such a tenuous relationship with bread-baking? Aside from its associations with her mother, what is it about bread that makes Daria nervous?

2. At one point towards the end of their marriage, Caroline describes her desire to simply walk away and leave Jack as “almost overwhelming. Almost.” And yet she can never forgive Jack “for the way he had blown open the door of their marriage first and left. Jack-in-the-box, turning his own handle, springing up and out, hands free.”

Why is Caroline unable to forgive Jack for leaving, when she herself says she almost left? Why had she chosen to stay? What is Caroline really angry about?

3. Early on, Kate says that she’s not used to being alone with her body, having seen it as “the property of others” for so long. Later, Caroline wonders “if she had treated more things as a part of herself rather than an accessory, perhaps everything would have turned out differently.”

Does Kate ever reclaim her body? What kind of life events can make women feel disconnected from their bodies?

4. Caroline’s powerful devotion to her son, both before and after his birth, arguably marks the beginning of the rift that ultimately divides her and Jack. Kate blames the dissolution of her own marriage on the same thing, saying “My husband said he didn’t want to be married to Robin’s mother anymore.” And yet, Sara’s dedication to (and seeming inability to be separated from) her own children in no way weakens her marriage with Dan. Why is this? How is it that the same responses to the act of having children can have such different results?

5. Marion is described as “originally from the Midwest, a geographical inheritance that didn’t so much cling as grow up through her.” In many ways, Marion and Daria are complete opposites. How is Daria’s personality shaped by being the much-younger sister? How are Marion and Daria’s relationships with their mother different, and how are they shaped by those relationships?

6. How are the mothers in this circle — Sara, Kate, Marion, Caroline — shaped by their children?

7. “I grew up with you, Caroline had wanted to tell [Jack], when he said he was leaving her, twenty-five years later. You are a grown-up. But she knew, looking at his face, that it wouldn’t make any difference. That it was, perhaps, precisely the point.”

Later, Elaine asks Ava whether anyone has ever told her that she needs “to grow down a little”. What does being a “grown-up” actually mean?

8. In what ways are the themes of age and maturity explored? Are age and maturity the same thing to these women?

9. What does Hadley’s garden — and Kate’s challenge that she take care of it — symbolize?

10. Caroline says “You could never be certain what you would find in a book that had spent time with someone else.... Bits of life tucked liked stowaways in between the chapters.” Later Caroline finds Jack’s biopsy report tucked into one of his abandoned thrillers at the beach house. How does this knowledge change her understanding of the rough period she and Jack went through during Kate’s chemo? Had she known about the biopsy at the time, would Caroline have done anything differently? Was Jack right to conceal it from her?

11. What challenges would you give to your own loved ones? To yourself?