

Promise Me

How a Sister's Love Launched the Global
Movement to End Breast Cancer

By Nancy G. Brinker

READING GROUP GUIDE



Introduction

Susan G. Komen has become a household name. The foundation created in her memory has turned the pink ribbon into a symbol of hope everywhere. Each year, millions of people worldwide take part in SGK Race for the Cure events, and thanks to the more than \$1.5 billion contributed by SGK for cutting-edge research and community programs, a breast cancer diagnosis today is no longer a death sentence.

But most Americans know very little about Suzy Goodman Komen's life, or the remarkable promise that led her sister, Nancy, to transform the way ordinary people can make a difference in the world. *Promise Me* at last brings this story to light. From the Goodman girls' childhood in postwar Peoria, Illinois, to the devastating diagnosis that took Suzy's life at age thirty-six, the opening chapters deliver a portrait of a family that thrived on hope and generosity as the best antidotes to despair. Recounting the impact of losing her sister, Nancy Brinker captures the turning points that made her a pioneering force in cause-related marketing at a time when the media shied away from publishing the words "breast cancer." She also describes a career that wove her personal and professional worlds together in powerful ways, culminating in her marriage to restaurant magnate Norman Brinker, whose dynamic approach

to entrepreneurship became Nancy's model for running her foundation.

Until fairly recently, breast cancer was shrouded in stigma. In that climate of shame, Suzy faced her grim prognosis by asking Nancy to promise many things: To end the silence; to raise money for scientific research; to one day cure breast cancer for good. Now at the helm of arguably the most highly regarded health-related charity in the world, Nancy invites us to journey with her in keeping that promise.

Whether you read *Promise Me* with your book club, with your best friend, or with your sister, this is a book that is sure to inspire compelling conversations. We hope that the following topics will enhance your experience of this moving memoir.

Topics and Questions for Discussion

1. How would you describe the relationship between Nancy and Suzy? Did the relationship between the sisters resonate for you? Did it remind you of your own relationship with a sister or close friend? Why or why not?
2. How were Nancy and Suzy shaped by the legacies of cancer in their family? Which messages from their many role models—including their parents—proved to be the most lasting?

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3. What explains the differences between Suzy's and Nancy's responses to their own cancer diagnoses? What can we learn from the knowledge that women respond to illness in many different ways? How would you describe your approach to doctors and caring for yourself?

4. What did Suzy and Nancy learn about themselves on their memorable tour of Europe? What enabled them to be so adventurous yet so mature?

5. A key component to Nancy's work is public awareness and education. What surprising truths did you learn about breast cancer by reading this book? As Nancy shared inspiring stories of survivors from all walks of life, how did these experiences compare to those of women you have known who confronted a cancer diagnosis?

6. Discuss the medical history presented in *Promise Me*. What recurring themes did you notice in the interactions between male doctors and female patients? What does it take to become an empowered patient, whether you're a man or a woman?

7. What was the effect of the time line Nancy used in recounting the chapters of her life? How does it mirror memory to weave the past and the present together? How did her newfound hometown—Dallas—compare to Illinois in reflecting her personality? What locale represents "home" to you?

8. From Stanley Marcus to Norman Brinker, Nancy learned marketing from some of the most successful American businessmen.

Should the principles change when they're applied to the nonprofit world? What unique traits did Nancy bring to the table, enabling her to surpass her mentors' success in philanthropy?

9. Nancy and Suzy had different expectations of marriage, yet they both experienced first marriages that weren't meant to be. As Nancy describes the men she has loved at various points in her life, how does she convey her own stages of personal growth? What relationships have defined you?

10. As a couple, Nancy and Norman Brinker seemed to have it all: Passion, companionship, shared interests and values, and a deep commitment to giving back. Yet eventually, their marriage ended. Did you find their love story believable? Inspiring? Why do you think they got divorced? Do you think the marriage could have been saved?

11. Suzy's surgeon was confident that his approach would be sufficient in treating her cancer and never discussed any further treatment with her. In contrast, Nancy's physicians urged caution, concerned that scar tissue from another biopsy would cloud results of future mammograms, but ultimately respected her decisions and formed a treatment plan in partnership with her. What did you discover about doctors' perspectives by reading *Promise Me*? Do you have open communication and a healthy partnership with your physician? How will improved technology, including more predictive mammograms, affect the doctor-patient dialogue in the future?

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12. What aspects of caregiving are presented in *Promise Me*? What lessons about being a caregiver and being a patient did Nancy learn from her sister's illness and her own? How did the experience compare to Norman's long road to recovery after his accident?

13. Which conversations with your physician make you the most uncomfortable? Did the book change the way you will discuss health-care topics? Why did American society previously keep explicit cancer information out of the media, and sometimes even out of the doctor's examining room?

14. What aspects of motherhood are presented in *Promise Me*? Is there a difference between the healing provided by mothers and fathers?

15. *Promise Me* brims with history. How were the Goodman sisters influenced by the headlines of their youth? What did their identity as Jewish women in postwar America mean to them?

16. Discuss the concept of physical beauty as it plays out in Nancy's memoir. She describes feeling awkward about her appearance as a child, though she and her sister were both beautiful women. Does a woman derive power or lose power when she invests in her physical appearance? When a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer, what questions of conventional beauty does she have to face?

17. Which of the resources included at the back of the book are you most interested in exploring? Which Susan G. Komen for

the Cure® events and programs have you supported, or considered supporting, in the past? What successes do you predict in breast-cancer research for the next generation of women worldwide?

About the Author

Nancy G. Brinker is the founder and CEO of Susan G. Komen for the Cure. She has served as Ambassador to Hungary and Chief of Protocol of the United States and is currently the Goodwill Ambassador for Cancer Control for the World Health Organization. She has been the recipient of many prestigious awards, including the 2009 Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest award that can be bestowed on a civilian.

Joni Rodgers is the New York Times bestselling author of *Bald in the Land of Big Hair*, a memoir of her cancer treatment and recovery.