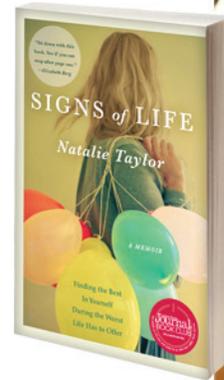


Random House Reader's Guide Discussion Questions

Signs of Life, a novel by Natalie Taylor



1 Compare Natalie's experience to the times when you have had to find your way back from despair. Which aspects of her story could you relate to easily? Which aspects opened your eyes to the personal, individual nature of grief?

2 Natalie compares her intense need for loyal, authentic supporters to Don Corleone's Family: Josh's sister Ashley is in; his college friend Ted is out, after insulting Mathews. Without Josh, how does she create a new sense of trust in her life? How did the different aspects of her "team," including her students and Dr. G., reflect the different needs she experienced?

3 Which of the book's literary references, from Gatsby's all-consuming love for Daisy to Robert Frost's dark winter night and Sartre's exitless hell, resonated with you the most? What healing powers do poetry and fiction possess?

4 What version of Josh emerges from Natalie's memories of him? What were your impressions of him? What legacies does he leave for Kai?

5 If Natalie's Fairy Mom Godmother showed up in your fantasies, what problems would she solve for you? What situations do you need extra nerve to conquer right now?

6 In her grief support group, Natalie doesn't like to draw attention to the young age at which she was widowed. The variety of stories told by the group members, underscored by Billy Collins's poem "Picnic, Lightning," reiterates the unpredictable nature of death. What does *Signs of Life* tell us about getting comfortable (or not) with this uncertainty?

7

Were you surprised that Natalie might be stigmatized as a single mother? How is her parenting affected (perhaps even strengthened) by having to raise Kai without Josh? How do her own parents make a path for her to follow?

8

How is Natalie's outlook on life shaped by her role as a teacher? As she helps her students look beyond statistics, what is she teaching them about the world?

9

Marriage and dating are important elements in the lives of Natalie's friends. How would your dating checklists compare to Natalie's? Does marriage mean finding someone who meets all the criteria?

10

Discuss the role of "home" and a sense of place in *Signs of Life*. How is Natalie's identity shaped by houses, from the vacation house of her youth to the house she and Josh were renovating?

11

Natalie's dogs provide a connection to her life with Josh. As she cares for them and tries to train them, do they care for her and train her too, on some level?

12

What are some of the differences between Moo and Ashley? How do these differences combine to give Natalie the full range of encouragement she needs?

13

Near the close of the book, in the second August, Natalie describes her grandparents' transition from their home, and she recounts the hardships they endured in Europe during the Second World War before immigrating to America. What does their strength, as well as their frailty, mean to her at this point in her life? What do their stories indicate about the way other generations coped with adversity?

14

14. What does the triathlon do for Natalie's mind and spirit? How does the process of training relieve the physical symptoms she has coped with as a result of grief? What have been the most significant "finish lines" in your life?

15

Dr. G. assures Natalie, "You are only visiting this place," referring to a state of sadness and depression. Discuss some of the emotional places you have visited. Did they ultimately enrich your life journey?