

CENOTAPHS

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

1. In their first scene together, Sam states of Ben, “In our first moment together, a charge connected us unlike anything I’d experienced. The connection scared me.” Have you ever felt such an immediate and intimate connection with another human being?
2. Ben is deeply concerned about what it means to be a good man, a good father, and a good citizen. What do you think it means to be a good person, partner, parent, friend, and citizen?
3. Ben introduces the reader to some of his key words and ideas, words like *generative* and *workable*, and the idea about *flipping*. What do you think of these? What are some touchstone words and ideas that help guide you?
4. Ben asks early on – “What is the nature of families? I think it’s about our inherent longing for connection, for belonging to something substantial, for wanting to be understood.” Does this definition work for you? What is your definition of the nature of families?
5. Ben has not been able to forgive himself for his actions for over 30 years. What do you think of the night that Ben became violent? Was he alone to blame? Do you believe he made the right choice in not telling his children what happened?
6. Sam also blamed herself for what happened to her family. Do you believe she was at fault?
7. A cenotaph is a monument to someone buried elsewhere. It’s the name of the book. It’s also the name of the structure that Ben built to honor Marianne after her death. Throughout the book, there are other Cenotaphs of sorts: Ben’s wall of photos, Ben’s

music museum, many others. Can you name some of them? Do you have any examples of Cenotaphs in your life?

8. At one point in the novel, Ben states, “Sometimes an undercurrent joins two people right from the start.” This is what happened to Ben and Sam. It's what made these two broken people open up and trust each other with their stories. Have you experienced this with anyone in your life? How did it feel? Where did it take you?
9. Ben and Scott have a decades-old friendship. They are close, like chosen brothers. They both loved Marianne. After the accident, they shared a tragic loss and a secret. How do you think they were able to move forward and stay close after Marianne was gone? Could you have done what Ben did for his friend? Do you believe Ben’s choice was more about saving Scott or saving himself in some way?
10. When Ben and Sam meet the guys at Joy’s for the first time, some of the guys are disrespectful and attack Sam’s views of life and politics. Instead of fighting them, Sam plays the situation differently. She says “There’s not enough real conversations of real topics.” She states that she “chose to enter into a conversation with them on her own terms” What did you think of this scene and of the way that Sam managed it, diffusing it yet got her points across?
11. After Ben tells Sam his story about his night of violence, she leaves without a word. After a few weeks, she returns and takes him to Foundland to tell him her story. Afterwards, Ben says to Sam, “I’ll understand if you can’t stay” and Sam tells him, “You’re not the same as him.” He replies, “I was closer to him once”, and she replies, “Yes, but you’ve suffered enough. So have I.” They both did suffer for years, and much of that suffering they brought on themselves. This concept of suffering enough—do you believe in it? Do we need to suffer for our mistakes? How much is enough? Who decides?
12. Ben and Sam decide to take *Samadhi* vows which they define as “like adopting each other / like being a chosen family.” Many today talk of chosen families or tribes or moais. Have you experienced relationships in your life that would fall into these categories?

What do you think of their Samadhi vows taken in front of their friends? Is this something you would consider doing?

13. In her vows to Ben, Sam states “both Ben and I are defined by stories of violence.” She then asks, “Why should any of us be defined by a single point in time?” Have you felt defined by a moment in time? Do you know anyone who has? Have you or others been locked in by that incident?

14. After Ben’s funeral, the chapter titled “A Life Worth Living” Ben explores in his musings what it means to live a life worth living? What would a life worth living look like to you?

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