

# The End of Your Life Book Club Study Guide

## The End of Your Life Book Club by Will Schwalbe

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# Contents

<a href="#">The End of Your Life Book Club Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Crossing to Safety-Seventy Verses of Emptiness.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Majorie Morningstar-Daily Strength For Daily Needs.....</a>	<a href="#">7</a>
<a href="#">People of the Book-The Uncommon Reader.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">The Lizard Cage-Continental Drift.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">The Painted Veil-Wherever You Go, There You Are.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Kokoro-The Reluctant Fundamentalist.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">The Year of Magical Thinking-Girls Like Us.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Suite-Francoise-The Elegance of the Hedgehog.....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo-My Father's Tears.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Too Much Happiness-Epilogue.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">23</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">34</a>

## Plot Summary

"The End of Your Life Book Club" by writer and publisher Will Schwalbe, is a novel about the author's mother, exploring her relationship with books and her commitment to changing the world for the better. Mary Ann, Will's mother, is diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in her early seventies. The entire family is made aware of her illness, and it begins to change the way they interact with one another in subtle and positive ways. Always close to one another, Will and his mother begin a book club, in which they exchange and discuss books with one another frequently. Though this practice is actually something they have done with one another throughout their lives, Mary Ann's illness and approaching death causes them to seek out books that can teach them more about life and the struggles which they face on a regular basis. Even though Mary Ann is dying, she is far from giving up on her countless humanitarian causes, most notably a traveling library she hopes to install in Afghanistan before she passes. This remarkable narrative covers Mary Ann's history and her activity in the civil rights movement, as well as her charity work and powerful faith, which only grows stronger as her illness grows. In turn, the author details the lessons he learns from his mother over the years, and continually supports his mother's idea that books are more than just stories, they are powerful agents for change across the world.

Mary Ann confronts her sickness with strength, but her humble nature refuses to allow her to consider herself brave, as she has spent enough time in the third world to know that despite her sickness she is very fortunate. In fact, it is stories of bravery and courage from the third world that continues to support her and give her strength, and she manages to survive and remain relatively healthy for a very long time in comparison to others diagnosed with her same form of pancreatic cancer. Mary Ann manages to survive over two years with a disease that typically kills people within six months of its diagnosis, and she lives surrounded by friends and family who care deeply about her. She shares her love of books with everyone around her, including her grandchildren, and passes on with the knowledge that she had more time with them than many could every hope for. Will realizes that despite the grief he feels when she dies, he will be able to share his mother's favorite books with her grandchildren, and he continues to draw strength from the memories of his mother and the books they shared together.



# Crossing to Safety-Seventy Verses of Emptiness

## Crossing to Safety-Seventy Verses of Emptiness Summary

In *Crossing to Safety*, Will and his mother begin their book club one day while they wait for his mother's blood-test results to return. She needs these results before she can undergo chemo. The first book she reads is *Crossing to Safety* by Wallace Stegner. Will has worked in publishing for a long time. Since one of the characters in the novel is dying of cancer, he naturally wants to talk to his mom about the book once he finishes it. They have already read many books together before this one, and something Will has learned from his mother is that reading isn't the opposite of doing, it is the opposite of dying.

In "Appointment in Samara", both Will and his mother are very interested in opening lines of novels. His mother and father spend a lot of time in Florida, and he and his siblings take turns visiting their parents, but their time is sought after by all sorts of people. Their mother is in charge of all family planning, and in fact spent much of her life as a professional coordinator for various groups of people, including helping establish a series of libraries on Afghanistan, a country she wound up visiting many times throughout her career. This part of her life has put her in danger many times, and it was after one such trip that she returned sick with cancer. At first, her family was not concerned because she often came back from trips with some form of bizarre illness or another. She always got better after these trips, but this time, she continued to get worse after her return. On *Chesil Beach*, which they both read, contained dark themes about war, which both both Will and his mother are drawn to.

The whole family visits Maine for their father's 80th birthday in August of that year, which their mother organized, but Will's dad complains at how much his mother has been struggling lately. The last weekend of that Summer, Will and his partner David spend time in a house once owned by John O'Hara, a famous author. The bookshelves there are lined with O'Hara's books, so Will reads "Appointment in Samara", which is a story about an impulsive young car salesman. He and his mother discuss the book and its relevance to the Iraqi War. His mother lets him know she is seeing the doctor for more tests to determine why she is still sick. This all takes place during an extremely busy period in everyone's lives. He gets the news that his mom has cancer at the Frankfurt Book Fair. She tells him this but quickly changes the subject so that they can discuss his job. He is very frustrated with it, so she tells him to give his notice and begin working on something he actually wants to do. He returns to his hotel after the conversation and watches TV, which is unusual for him. He doesn't connect with his mother's tragedy at first, but he does talk everything over with his father and siblings. She asks him to bring a book back from the book fair for her.



In *Seventy Verses on Emptiness*, Will's mother claims to be feeling better after he returns from Frankfurt. During a phone conversation, they talk about Nina and her reluctance to move to Geneva. She also mentions some new books, "The Diamond Cutter Sutra", and "Seventy Verses on Emptiness". These works impress Will greatly. The first books he and his mom read together before the club is officially begun are the "Savage Detectives" and "Man Gone Down". These are both novels about disappointment.

Will wants his mom to have a blog that describes her experiences with cancer, but his mom doesn't want to be the one to write it, so she has him do it for her. Will also arranges for her to talk with family friend Rodger, who was the primary caregiver for someone with pancreatic cancer for five years. She talks to Rodger, but does not enjoy the conversation. Rodger warns her that her life is going to be painful and she'll be totally unable to care for herself. Will regrets his recommendation and his mother is very upset by the conversation.

More and more of their friends learn that she has cancer, and she insists that she's going to fight to the end, but that her form of cancer is always fatal. She listens to their stories of friends who had cancer, and in the meantime continues with her charity work. As time passes, Nina wants less and less to move to Geneva, since she wants to remain close to her mother in order to help, but her mother insists that she move on with her life.

Will's mom gives him the book "A Thousand Splendid Suns". They discuss the book one day, and Mom is excited that the book's author is focusing on women's issues. They read the "Etiquette of Stillness" at the same time, which is about a person who survived cancer. Will enjoys the book greatly. It teaches him plenty about how to communicate with his mother. He finishes the book and calls his mom the next morning. She's feeling better, but still wants him to be the one to write the blog, even though she's composed the first post for him. She also asks him to go with her to her third chemotherapy sessions, which becomes a regular event for them. She begins reading "The Coldest Winter" which Will has given her. The book was written by a man who used to date one of her college friends. The author later became friends with Will before he was killed in a car accident. Will's mom continues to insist that Nina go to Geneva, and when Will calls his sister, she promises that she is in fact going.

## **Crossing to Safety-Seventy Verses of Emptiness Analysis**

This section briefly outlines the narrator's life, his relationship with his mother, and the beginning of their book club, which actually began long before her illness. Immediately obvious, is that books assume a great significance in both the narrator's life and the life of his mother. They are also relatively wealthy and lead relatively interesting lives. The family appears to be very closely knit, and the narrator's mom clearly assumes the central role in planning and organizing all of their activities. But she is not regarded as controlling, but instead appears to be an extremely gifted coordinator. She is also a very



progressively minded woman, and belongs to a generation of women known for being extremely politically active and contributing in very significant ways to the civil rights movement. When Will's mother reveals to him that she has been diagnosed with cancer, the news does not register emotionally with him, and this is partly due to his very busy life. It is unclear what her initial reaction to the news is, though she does not seem like the type of person to become immersed in self-pity. Instead, she shares the news with friends and family, making it clear there is little hope for her survival yet still maintaining a very positive attitude. This too goes a long way towards establishing Will's mother as a very positive character, and she will very clearly be the focus of the book. Books are also clearly vital to the narrative, as Will's mother feels compelled to read them as frequently as she can, and shares many of them with her son Will. This is even more clear since Will is in the publishing industry. He appears to care about books at least as much as his mother, and may even have aspirations about becoming a writer.



# Marjorie Morningstar-Daily Strength For Daily Needs

## Marjorie Morningstar-Daily Strength For Daily Needs Summary

Will goes with his mother to chemotherapy for the first time in November. There are many interruptions there, and his mom dislikes interruptions. That first day at the hospital with her, he's frustrated with his job, and his mom offers to let him go deal with the problem, but he refuses to leave her. That's when they begin to set up the book club. She tells him a little about her childhood. Her parents were very unhappy together, and dragged on their marriage for much longer than they should have. Will's mother was a drama teacher when she was young, and she attended the first showings of "Death of a Salesman". Her generation is the first generation of women told that they could do anything they wanted. Her favorite books as a child were the Nancy Drew mysteries, and her favorite book of all time is "Gone With The Wind". She also greatly enjoyed "Marjorie Morningstar", which is a similar book written at roughly the same time. She went to college at Radcliffe and became very good friends with one of her professors, Bob Chapman, who died in 2001 but always remained a close family friend. Will and her talk about Bob briefly while his mom waits for her chemotherapy treatment. They discuss books once more, and focus on *The Coldest Winter*. Mom believes that discussing personal details of one's life does not help to explain a person, and that people often spend too much time trading small details with each other that don't matter. They are interrupted by a doctor with questions to see if she is eligible for part of a study. It involves the spiritual well-being of people with stage four cancer, and that is when Will's mom discovers she has stage four cancer.

In *The Hobbit*, they go together to the pharmacy and Will tells a joke about pharmacy wait times. Mom believes firmly in universal health care, and always gets angry while at the pharmacy because Medicare is such a poor system. At one point, she pays for someone else's medication when they cannot afford it. Will's father is Jewish, and asked his mother to marry him on their very first date. She read to Will every night as a child, except once, when they had friends over, and he threw a complete tantrum. He and his brother learned to read to themselves at a very young age. He read *The Hobbit* as a child when he was very sick in Morocco. Afterwards, he goes on to read the "Lord of the Rings" while his brother reads "Chronicles of Narnia". His mother preferred Narnia as well. Will's mom eventually uses her knowledge of theater to become admissions director at Radcliffe. Since both of their parents work, the children had a lot of time to themselves growing up. They spend a lot of this time reading. Will and his siblings grew up in a community where people led very interesting lives, and books were always part of those lives.



Will used to enjoy books about Paul Revere, and books written by Alistair McLean. He recalls an incident in his childhood where his mother was so busy she accidentally took the dog's dewormer pill and gave the dog her birth control. He reflects on how much his life has changed as an adult. His mom continues putting the library in Afghanistan together, but is very often sick from cancer and chemo treatments. She feels very sick the day of Thanksgiving and does not attend the family dinner. Afterwards, Will becomes very sad about his mother's illness for the first time. He looks for his old copy of *The Hobbit*, and reads it again. His mom claims to feel better the day after Thanksgiving.

In "Daily Strength for Daily Needs", Will was obsessed with stuffed animals at a young age. He especially liked his turtle, but goes away for a week, and when he returns, his mother says that the turtle died. He mentions that to his mother one morning before her chemo treatment. She says she gave it to an orphanage. He realizes that he is still upset with her over the incident. His mother has recently reconnected with an old friend of hers from college. Through this friend, she and Will begin reading "Daily Strength for Daily Needs", which Will gets a great deal of strength from, although he looked down on it the first time he read it. Will is not a religious person, but his mother is. His brother is also a Sunday school teacher, but as a child Will refused to go to Sunday school, which bothered his mom greatly. He eventually chooses to go to a Christian Science service, which doesn't exactly please his mom either, but eventually he loses all interest in religion. After he and his mom begin the book club together, she tries to include as much religious material as possible. She wants both him and his brother to be present for the next chemo session, since results will be coming back to show if the chemo has been working at all. He notices that his mom's health seems to be wearing thin. He tells his mom that he is going to pray for her.

## **Majorie Morningstar-Daily Strength For Daily Needs Analysis**

The religious tendencies of Will's family in general, and his mother in particular, are explored in this section, as well as Will's childhood and the way in which he was raised by his mother and father. He had a very fortunate childhood, and, not surprisingly, books play a very large role in it. His parents were both very busy during his childhood, but Will and his siblings are very well taken care of, and each of them seems talented and well-educated, as well as having traveled to many different places and experienced many different cultures throughout the world. The families and friends surrounding them as Will grew up also seem very interesting, and lead very interesting lives according to the narrator. This establishes his family's social status and their common associates.

His mother is clearly a very religious person, and Will and her are somewhat at odds with each other in this particular instance, since Will struggles to remain interested in religion for a brief time in his childhood before he abandons religion altogether. However, this division between him and his mom does not serve to put distance between them, and it is very clear that they remain close to one another throughout their lives. His memories also detail his mother's personality when he was younger. She was





still very interested in charity works, and this interest, along with her faith, shapes her life in a very powerful way throughout her life, eventually giving her the strength to travel to dangerous places in the world in the hopes of doing good works there. Still, the narrator only seems concerned about describing his childhood so that the reader gets a better sense of who his mother was. He seems primarily concerned with sharing who she was as a person.



# People of the Book-The Uncommon Reader

## People of the Book-The Uncommon Reader Summary

In "People of the Book", the family waits for the scan results. He and his brother both talk much since they are nervous. Dr. O'Reilly enters. Many of the tumors have shrunk, which means that the chemo is working. Will and his mother choose new books for their club. Mom reveals that her New Year's resolution is to ensure that the library in Afghanistan gets built. She also wants Will to quit his job.

In "I Am Sorrow", decades earlier, mom began communicating with a nun in Thailand. Will's mother sends her books on a regular basis, and eventually decides to take leave from her job and work at the nun's camp and even goes so far as to take Nina with her. The refugee camp turns out to be a horrible place, but by the end of their time, Nina decides to stay on, and the experience encourages Mom to change her career path as well.

In The Uncommon Reader, even though Will's mom is not feeling well, she goes on a trip to London in January of 2008. She has a bad fever at the beginning of the trip, and the rest of the trip doesn't go much better. She returns, and she and Will pick a new book, Felicia's Journey. They choose The Uncommon Reader afterwards. Will finally quits his job, and his mom encourages him to write. At a party, they discuss an acquaintance who suffered from Alzheimer's, and his mother expresses terror at that particular disease. Will realizes that in the future, he will be able to share his mom's favorite books with his grandchildren.

## People of the Book-The Uncommon Reader Analysis

The reality of Will's mother's illness becomes stronger, and the entire family grows more nervous over her future. The initial news regarding their mother's illness is good; the tumors have shrunk, but this only delays the inevitable, since the prospects of surviving the illness are virtually nonexistent. Mom's former adventures continue to be described, further fleshing out important relationships between Will's mother and her children. In the present, Will's mom continues to try to keep up her lifestyle, and encounters great difficulties doing so, since she is commonly sick and exhausted from having cancer. Will also grows increasingly apprehensive about his mother's well-being, but gains solace from the idea that they have closely shared each other's taste in books throughout the years.



# The Lizard Cage-Continental Drift

## The Lizard Cage-Continental Drift Summary

Will finally reads "The Lizard Cage" after his mother's insistence that he do so for a very long time. It's about a Buddhist monk imprisoned in Burma. His mother has been involved in the civil rights movement, and this book renews her interests there and in Afghanistan.

In "Brat Farrar", Will's publishing company had an opportunity to publish a book about a computer scientist dying of pancreatic cancer. He gives a copy of the manuscript to his mother as he goes to Florida for a visit, but he sees her in a wig for the very first time. He's shocked to see her in it, but makes every attempt to pretend nothing is unusual. He offers the manuscript to his mom by leaving it on her coffee table as he goes out for a walk. He reads "Brat Farrar" on the beach. He likes the book a lot and wants to give the book to his mom quickly. He returns to her apartment and asks what she thought of the manuscript. She likes it because it reminds her that she was allowed to see her children grow up, and she's been allowed to know her grandchildren.

In "Continental Drift", Will's mom continues to be frank and candid about her sickness to friends and family, and grows irritated with people when they try to convince her or themselves that she will be okay. She goes back and forth very rapidly between discussing her death and not. She spends a lot of her time focused on the Afghan library. She's also had a bad reaction to one of the chemo drugs, but feels better than usual. Dr. O'Reilly does in fact tell her that there are no new tumors and the ones she has are still shrinking. His mom believes all the prayers made the difference. After a conversation in which his mom expresses distaste for silly books, Willy introduces their next book, "Continental Drift", which is considered highly depressing, with much graphic violence. For her next birthday, Will's mom chooses a barbeque restaurant, but she begins to feel worse as the day approaches, and she's very sick when the day comes around. They talk about "Continental Drift" during the meal, and his mom says it is probably the most brilliant thing she's ever read, but also the most depressing. She quickly grows tired and Will with his brother Doug make sure the party ends before she grows totally exhausted. Will begins to feel bad about choosing "Continental Drift" as the book they read together, and loses sleep over it. He calls his mom the next morning and she tells him she's been recommending "Continental Drift" to everyone she's talked to.

## The Lizard Cage-Continental Drift Analysis

Will's mother's taste in literature continues to lean towards stories that focus on those oppressed and deprived of their human rights. She also gathers strength and understanding from written accounts and books of people who suffered through cancer very much the same way as she does. In the case of the manuscript that Will allows her

to read, she realizes that she has been blessed with the ability to see her children grow up and the time to grow close to her grandchildren. At the same time, her desire for honesty does cause her to become irritated with people who remain unreasonably hopeful about her condition. Many of her friends still insist that she will recover, but she entertains no hope about recovering from pancreatic cancer completely, because almost no one has ever recovered from the disease. She continues to be drawn to very dark books, much like her son Will, and recommends "Continental Drift" to everyone despite her son's fear that the book was too grim to share with her.



# The Painted Veil-Wherever You Go, There You Are

## The Painted Veil-Wherever You Go, There You Are Summary

In "The Painted Veil", Will's mom rarely ever goes to the doctor, so that she doesn't even know she has cancer when she returns from Afghanistan. Throughout her illness, she refuses to consider herself "brave." She's known many people from third world countries who've suffered far worse than she has. After chemo, she feels like she will be getting very good news soon. Her Harvard friend gives her money to help with the library but makes her promise to take it easy. He donates one million to the project, but Will's mom doesn't ease off, in fact she just works that much harder to complete the project.

In "Murder in the Cathedral", Will's mom is thrilled over the news of her friend's donation, but rapidly grows sicker. She goes to Geneva with Will's dad in April of that year. The money makes the dream of the library almost a reality. They continue to read somewhat depressing books. They wind up revisiting one of his mom's old favorites, Murder in the Cathedral, by T.S. Eliot, but his mother winds up stranded in the hospital with a major infection. She is granted an honorary law doctorate in May of that year, and gives a speech about the upcoming presidential election that moves many in the audience to tears.

In "Wherever You Go, There You Are", Will's mom begins to wear the wig again in August of that year. She recommends yoga to her son, who says he doesn't have enough time. He's quit his job in publishing to begin a cooking website. His mom remains as busy as possible even with her illness. In September, she asks the doctor for a painkiller for the very first time. She recalls her conversation with Rodger and is grateful things still aren't as bad as they could be. At the next chemo session, Dr. O'Reilly suggests a new form of treatment to cut down on the needlesticks and which would also require less time at the clinic. She also gives Will's mom a prescription for Ritalin, to help her with her energy levels. She enjoys the Ritalin, and it helps her to continue reading at a very rapid pace. She has a port installed in her chest that allows her to do chemotherapy from home. She is worried about the election, and Will worries about her health if Obama loses, but Obama wins and his mom does very well for many days.

Though people with Pancreatic Cancer rarely live past six months, she has managed to survive for over a year to this point. The day of her next doctor's appointment, Will finds her in the waiting room totally distraught. Her friend, David Rohde, a fellow board member on the Afghan library project, has been kidnapped by terrorists.



## The Painted Veil-Wherever You Go, There You Are Analysis

Will clearly considers his mom as being a brave person, and it is interesting to note that his mother pays close attention to her feelings in a slightly unusual way, as exemplified in the way that she feels she will be getting good news soon after her chemo treatment. This is another aspect of her personality that the reader has not been introduced to, but she does in fact seem to be somewhat intuitive and slightly superstitious. The fact that her friend agrees to donate so much to the library gives her a lot of new strength and energy, but even the narrator notes importantly that his mother fails to uphold her part of the bargain—meaning that she does not slow down at all as far as her professional life is concerned. This is not very surprising, given the fact that she seems to draw a great deal of her well-being from the work that she accomplishes throughout her life. At this stage of her illness, her disease seems to be weakening, meaning that she will have much more time than anyone originally had cause to hope for.



# Kokoro-The Reluctant Fundamentalist

## Kokoro-The Reluctant Fundamentalist Summary

In "Kokoro", Will and his mother begin reading old collections of short stories from the New Yorker. News is filled with the financial collapse of 2008. Will is still building his cooking website, and is growing increasingly concerned about the site's future. Though her appetite has dropped sharply, Will's mom still has plans for Thanksgiving. She still worries about David and prays for his return by Christmas. Will recalls a quote from the book "Kokoro", which states that loneliness is the price paid for being alive in the modern world. He asks his mom if she was every lonely. She says no, but mentions David, who must be lonely in his captivity.

In "The Price of Salt", Will and his mother read the book of said title by Patricia Highsmith, in December of that year. The book makes Will think about how appreciative his mother is to the people helping her through cancer. His family Christmas was dominated by storytelling when he was young, as his mother had an excellent voice for storytelling. One year, Will and his siblings all began laughing for no reason during one of their mom's readings. She suddenly grew angry with them and threatens to cancel Christmas for that year. He reminds her of that night, and she does not recall it fondly.

People close to Will who have already lost a parent are beginning to ask him how he's doing. He suspects this is because they've been through something similar. His mom brings her grandchildren to her church and has everyone in the family make pudding that year for Christmas. She gives out many presents, and Will finally realizes that thank-you cards are about gratitude. He begins writing a thank-you letter to his mom and dad, and in fact discovers a thank-you letter in "The Price of Salt", which is written by his mom. The card is about gratitude.

In "The Reluctant Fundamentalist", people drop off many books for Will's mother, and she winds up donating many of them. After New Year's, they begin to read "The Reluctant Fundamentalist", a novel written by Mohsin Hamid, who is Pakistani but spent some time as a child in the United States. At the end of the novel, it is clear that one of the main characters is going to die, and Will and his mom argue over which it will be. David is still missing in captivity, and Will's mom still worries about him a great deal.

By mid January, Dr. O'Reilly announces that the tumors have begun to grown rapidly, so that they must try a new combination of meds, but it will not affect her trip to Florida for the year. Will's mom tells him after the appointment that she expected the news, and that is why she is excited about her family visiting in Florida.

## Kokoro-The Reluctant Fundamentalist Analysis

The pancreatic cancer progresses, and still Will's mother maintains a very active lifestyle and positive outlook. At this point in the story, her most serious concern is



David's captivity, and this absorbs a great deal of the narrative, alongside the beginnings of political discord in the United States as expressed through the financial crisis of 2008. The narrator's mother is naturally very concerned about these things, and not merely because they may be bad news for people that she cares about, but also because she is very likely to feel as though her life's meaning is very closely related to the outcome of the political situation. Meanwhile, Will's friends are very likely beginning to pick up on the fact that Will is concerned about his mother, as he has clearly become increasingly concerned over her well-being. Their brief argument over the uncertainty of the characters in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* symbolizes Will's difficulty with his mother's tenuous health situation, but at the same time goes a long way towards suggesting that she is at peace with the situation.





# The Year of Magical Thinking-Girls Like Us

## The Year of Magical Thinking-Girls Like Us Summary

Actor Patrick Swayze is diagnosed with cancer just a few months after Will's mom. She calls Will after an interview in which the actor expresses great hope, though he is fairly certain that the cancer will kill him. She arrives in Vero Beach, Florida, and is very ill, but begins feeling better the next day. They set out to watch the manatees and Will finds himself hoping they come so that his mother will feel even better. She greets many people, and Will only wants to talk to her about books. She recommends talking to random people because that is the only way you can tell if someone is worth talking to.

They read Joan Didion's "The Year of Magical Thinking", in which the author talks about the grief she experienced when she lost her parents. Will resolves to tell his mother everything he can before she passes on.

In "Olive Kitteridge: Will's mom returns to New York in March, and has grown much more frail. Will's sister Nina puts her in contact with Dr. Kathleen Foley, and nurse Nessa Coyle. They celebrate her 75th birthday at the end of March, for which they decide to throw a small party. They settle on reading "In Other Rooms", "Other Wonders", and "Olive Kitteridge". They begin doing chemo treatments at the hospital once more, although the drip is still intalled into the port in her chest to cut down on needlemarks. Will's mom does not believe that the treatments are working any longer, and Will notices that she looks sicker. She enjoys "Olive Kitteridge". At the next visit, Will's mom is told the cancer is growing even more rapidly. They must evaluate new treatment options. She is very sick before her birthday party, but enjoys In Other Rooms, Other Wonders. One conversation they have about the book leads them to discuss Pakistan and Afghanistan. She gets a large flower arrangement the day before her birthday from her former students at Nightingale. She calls the next morning to say that her fever has gone, but hadn't even told anyone she had a fever.

In "Girls Like Us", Will and his mom begin reading books more quickly because of his mom's deteriorating health. They read the "Bolter", a novel about the women's suffrage movement. Will's mom enjoys the book and identifies with the author, Idina. She corresponds with women roughly ten years younger than her in order to help them. Will and his mother return to the hospital in April to see if she qualifies for experimental treatments. Dr. O'Reilly lets it be known that she might in fact qualify to be part of some new studies.



## The Year of Magical Thinking-Girls Like Us Analysis

Patrick Swayze's diagnosis occurs so near to Will's mothers that it allows us a good sense of what she was going through emotionally sense she so readily identified with a lot of the things he claimed to be feeling in the interview. Her time in Florida is well spent, as usual, and Will seems to be worrying about her a great deal more than she is worrying about herself, but this is easily explained, and clearly due to the fact that she is rapidly growing sicker in such a short period of time. Despite the fact that her health is failing her very quickly, she clearly feels she has a great deal to live and work for still, but she is beginning to grow too sick to enjoy the plans that she makes, and it has become clear that she is concealing the extent of her sickness to the rest of her family, since she hides the fact that she has a fever from them. She and Will accelerate the pace at which they read books as a means of getting as much out of the time that she has left as they possibly can.



# Suite-Francoise-The Elegance of the Hedgehog

## Suite-Francoise-The Elegance of the Hedgehog Summary

Will and his mom read the book "Suite Francoise" next, and their conversations are constantly drawn back to it. The book details child-soldiers and Nazi-controlled France. By May, there is still no news of David Rohde. There is a great deal of work for the libraries in Afghanistan. Will has begun to grow angry at the fact that his mother is dying. He asks her the best way to get started on charity work. She recommends doing what you're already good at and donating money.

In "The Bite of the Mango", Will's mother and her friends and associates gather in Gotham Hall for an awards ceremony. Will knows that his mother does not plan to fight her cancer forever, and will eventually end treatments. One of her friends, Mariatu Kamara, had both of her hands severed so that she would be unable to vote in her home country. She details her account in the book *The Bite of the Mango*. After the lunch, Will's mom gets sicker. She finally talks to Will about her obituary. Will and his partner David visit friends of theirs, Tom and Andy later that May. While there, they get a call from Larry Kraemer, who tells them that Rodger killed himself because of chronic back pain. Will's mom needs to decide if she wants to undergo experimental treatment. She plans to see a production of *Romeo and Juliet* in which the two lovers survive the play.

In "The Elegance of the Hedgehog", Will's mom can't find anything she wants to read until they find "The Elegance of the Hedgehog". They return together to the doctor in June. There is brief hope that she'll have some space on a clinical trial, but they quickly realize the trial does not suit her well. This means that Will's mom must abandon chemotherapy completely since all traditional treatments have failed.

## Suite-Francoise-The Elegance of the Hedgehog Analysis

Will's mother's life is bound to come to an end soon, She makes this known to all of her friends and tries her best to finish up everything she can before the disease becomes too serious for her to manage, and it is clear that the libraries in Afghanistan that his mother worked so hard on will not be finished by the time of her death. This is likely one of the reasons Will begins to grow angry at the fact she is dying, because it means she will be forced to leave before she is truly ready to do so, but his anger is also certainly due to the fact that he is running out of time with a woman who was extremely important to him and his entire family.



# The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo-My Father's Tears

## The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo-My Father's Tears Summary

In "The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo", David Rohde finally escapes late in June. Will's mom receives word that he is safe. Weeks later, Will's parents travel to a friend's wedding to see him. Will begins to realize that in order for his mom to properly leave the world, certain things must take place first. News from the doctors continues to get worse. They read *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo* next, and she enjoys it a great deal since it is about abuse and corruption. After the doctor's appointment, Will tells her that he plans to write about their book club. He also tells his mom that he is very proud of her.

In Brooklyn, Will's mom has finally grown very sick. She has developed a severe infection and a very high fever. The next book they read deals with gay's relationships with their mothers, which is a very personal subject between Will and his own mother. He was twenty when he told his parents in a letter that he was gay and introduced them to his partner David. His parents are surprised again when his sister comes out several years later. After another appointment with Dr. O'Reilly, Will's mom is put on home hospice, which means that she is about to die and will undergo no further treatment. She fills out a new DNR in case she loses consciousness and cannot live without medical life support.

In *My Father's Tears*, Will's mother, finally named Mary Ann by the author, grows interested in pottery as she grows sicker. She begins buying much more of it. They begin reading *My Father's Tears*, and she has realized that the author of this book was in her freshman class at Radcliffe. Will reads the stories and thinks they're wonderful, but he and his mom never actually speak about the collection. Her cancer progresses rapidly, but she's still able to read and enjoy books. Will's father has been extremely caring throughout Mary Ann's sickness. He is perceived by those who don't know him as a generally gruff person, but he and his wife have always had a very loving relationship. She has Will write a blog announcing that she's in hospice care, and gets many return messages of caring and support, including one from David Rohde that briefly details his time spent as a hostage.

## The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo-My Father's Tears Analysis

The news of David Rohde's safety is well-received by both Will and his mother, who had been worrying a great deal about him since he went missing. For her, it no doubt means



it will be easier for her to pass on. It is here that the narrator decides to discuss his sexuality, very briefly, with the reader and his mother. This is clearly a subject that was the cause of some tension between Will and his parents, even if they made every effort to be understanding of Will. It is interesting to note that he mentions his sexuality very little until this point in the book, and then only seemingly to acknowledge that it was a part of his life and effected the relationship between him and his mother. Mary Ann's transfer to hospice means that she will not live very much longer at all, and it is also worth noting that the narrator chooses to include an important relationship between his mother and father that often gets misunderstood even by those close to them. Will's father is caring and very protective of his mother, and has done an excellent job caring for her over the last couple of years.



# Too Much Happiness-Epilogue

## Too Much Happiness-Epilogue Summary

In "Too Much Happiness", Will's mother constantly misplaces her reading glasses, which she buys frequently, and if fact, after she passes away, Will and his siblings find twenty-seven pairs of them in her apartment. They are reading a mystery novel entitled "The Miracle at Speedy Motors," Mary Ann likes the book because it describes African Villages like the ones she's visited. They celebrate his father's eighty-second birthday shortly thereafter, and his mother tells him that a friend of hers gave her marijuana for the first time, despite the fact that she was very active in the sixties. They visit Dr. O'Reilly for the last time one September first, and a few days later Will must visit California for a business meeting in San Francisco. Along the way he reads a collection of essays by Reynolds Price, who remarks on how seldom Americans speak directly about death. He and his mom speak over the phone often on Will's trip, and he can tell that she is in pain, but she forbids him to cut the trip short. Nevertheless, he hurries home when he discovers that she has stopped eating. She's mad at him for returning, but soon overcomes this and they discuss books once more. The family has gathered as Mary Ann's condition worsens rapidly. Will Reads to her everyone once in a while, until she passes early the morning of September fourteenth.

In the Epilogue, Will grieves for a long time after his mother's death. She has shared many stories about her with other people, and many of the people who knew her in life praise her and the work she did for people across the world. He finds himself constantly reminded of her words and lessons. More than anything, Will's mom taught him that books are the most powerful objects for change for the better on Earth.

## Too Much Happiness-Epilogue Analysis

Will's mother passes very quickly, but she is in the presence of her entire family. Her anger at Will for leaving his business trip in San Francisco early is evidence that Mary Ann can in fact be stubborn to a fault. In much the same way that she wanted Nina to continue her life and move to Geneva, she wanted Will to stay in San Francisco, but the reasons may be slightly different. In the case of Nina's move to Geneva, it was Mary Ann wanting her daughter to continue on with her life. In the case of Will's business trip, she very well may have been avoiding the reality that she was going to die. Will has clearly gathered many stories about his mother throughout their time together, and uses them to his very best ability to honor her memory.



# Characters

## Mary Ann

The narrator's mother, and the focus of the book. Mary Ann is in her early seventies at the beginning of the book when she is diagnosed with Pancreatic cancer. She is an avid reader, and began her life studying theater. As she grows older, she becomes increasingly interested in civil rights issues, and takes active roles in educating women in particular around the world. When she is diagnosed with cancer, she is heavily involved in trying to construct a mobile library for Afghanistan. She has three children, including the narrator Will, and is very close to her several grandchildren. She is widely known and respected, and receives all kinds of care and support from friends and family throughout her illness. Despite the fact that she survives much longer than those with pancreatic cancer generally live, she never considers herself brave or strong, since she knows many people from third world countries who have had to endure severe hardships during their entire lives. She is also very religious and socially progressive, and her faith gives her a great deal of hope throughout her illness.

She and her husband, Douglas, enjoy a very close and loving relationship, which is a stark contrast to her parent's relationship, since the two had difficulty getting along from early on and eventually had to separate. She is also responsible for all of the family planning that takes place, including birthdays, vacations, and other family get-togethers. She is a natural planner and organizer, and this serves her well when she works on humanitarian aid projects such as the library building in Afghanistan.

## Will

The narrator of the book. Will begins the book in the publishing industry, and it is very clear that he and his mom share a love of books. A large part of their relationship is based on sharing books that they have read, and this tradition eventually grows into their book club once Mary Ann is diagnosed with cancer. Will begins the book dissatisfied with his career, and his mom urges him to leave his job to pursue something he might actually enjoy. Will eventually does this and moves on to creating a cooking website, which does well by the end of the book. Will is very close with the members of his family and remains in constant communication with them throughout his mother's illness. Although he knows very early on that his mother is ill, he does not find himself becoming emotional over it until very late in her life, and he makes every effort to tell her how much he cares about her and how proud he is of her at this point, which results from a series of lessons that Will learns from the books that they read together. Will makes an effort to minimize this fact in the novel, but he is gay, and revealed this to his parents when he was twenty years old. They readily accepted this fact, and were somewhat more surprised when his sister Nina also turned out to be gay. Will lives in a progressive and religious family, for his brother, Doug, is a Sunday School teacher, and every bit as religious as his mother, but Will himself is not at all interested in religion,



and wasn't interested in it from a very early age, which originally bothered his mother, even though she eventually came to terms with this fact.

## Dr. O'Reilly

Dr. O'Reilly is Mary Ann's Oncologist, and very frequently mentioned. She is an excellent doctor, and it is clear the narrator has the utmost respect for her work. She is cheerful, caring, and, above all, honest and direct with Mary Ann and the members of her family. She maintains a positive outlook regarding Mary Ann's prognosis, but never suggests that Mary Ann might actually survive the cancer, because the survival rate of people diagnosed with pancreatic cancer is virtually nonexistent.

## Douglas

Will's father and Mary Ann's husband. Douglas is actually mentioned somewhat rarely throughout the novel. He is several years older than Mary Ann, and even though people tend to perceive him as gruff and cold, he is very caring towards Mary Ann during her illness, and it is very clear that the two have a very loving relationship.

## Rodger

Rodger is a family friend who wound up taking care of a member of his family with pancreatic cancer for five years. Because Rodger has a great deal of experience with the disease, Will arranges for him to talk with his mom. At first, Rodger's talk is very disturbing to Mary Ann, since he has no good news for her and explains to her that she is going to be in pain for the rest of her life. She grows to appreciate the conversation with him as time progresses, however, since things never get as bad for her as he's described. Rodger suffers from chronic back pain and eventually takes his own life as a result.

## Doug

Doug is Will's brother. He is a Sunday school teacher, and, like Will, shares his mother's love of reading.

## Nina

Nina is Will's sister. Like him, she is gay, and before her mother is diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, has plans to leave with her partner's family and move to Geneva. She wants to stay behind and be there for her mother, but her mother insists that she go through with the move.





## **David**

David is Will's partner, and accompanies him on several vacations and family functions.

## **David Rohde**

David Rohde is a friend of Mary Ann's who works with her on the Afghanistan Library project. He gets captured by terrorists, and Mary Ann spends much of the end of her life worrying about his safe return. He does eventually escape and they receive word that he is safe, much to Mary Ann's relief.

## **Mariatu Kamara**

Mariatu Kamara is a woman who had both of her hands severed by men in her country who did this in order to keep her from participating in elections. Mary Ann thinks very highly of this woman and her accomplishments, and is one of the people that Mary Ann considers "brave," as opposed to herself.



## Objects/Places

### Books

Will and his mother are constantly exchanging books with one another. Will is in publishing, and his mother is developing a library in Afghanistan.

### Medications

Medications relating to Mary Ann's cancer are commonly mentioned throughout the entire course of the novel.

### Thank You Cards

Thank You Cards are a lesson Mary Ann spends years trying to impress upon Will, and he finally understands their purpose when she becomes sick.

### Presents

As many of the scenes of the book take place during birthdays or holidays, presents are commonly exchanged, especially from Mary Ann to her grandchildren.

### Pottery

Mary Ann grows very interested in pottery as she nears death, and much more of it is found in her house during her final days.

### Florida

Will's parents both enjoy Florida very much, and spend a lot of time there.

### Frankfurt

Will first learns of his mother's illness while he is in Frankfurt, Germany, at a book fair.

### Hospitals

Since she has been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, Mary Ann and her son Will spend a lot of time inside of hospitals waiting for her to get her chemotherapy treatment.



## **Pharmacies**

Will and his mom spend a lot of time waiting at pharmacies for her prescriptions to be filled.

## **Afghanistan**

Mary Ann has spent time in Afghanistan, and is very concerned about women's rights in that country.



# Themes

## Reading

Much of the story conveys the importance of reading, which Mary Ann successfully conveys to her son Will, and which Will spends much time and effort conveying to the reader as the story's narrator. Will and his mother discuss seemingly every issue by reading and exchanging books, and Mary Ann goes so far as to say that reading is the opposite of dying. She does not feel as though books are a kind of passive entertainment, but rather they are powerful methods for transmitting ideas and effecting positive social change. Books are mentioned in every page of this book, and both Will and his mother seem to enjoy stories that themselves are mainly about reading other books, making this story a book about book about books, in a very real sense. Will's life at the beginning of the story revolves around books, as he is involved in the publishing industry. He also has clear aspirations about becoming a writer, which his mother greatly encourages. His mom's life also revolves around books, though in a slightly different way. Since she believes that books are the key to a better life, she works very hard in attempting to deliver these books to people in much poorer countries and in more unfortunate circumstances than her own. Her final project involves setting up a mobile library for people in Afghanistan, and she takes this project very seriously and works very hard on it despite her illness.

## Family

Family ties are also very important to the novel, as his mother's illness is coped with differently by each member of Will's family. He spends a great deal of time reflecting on what his childhood was like, and what his mother's earlier life was like, both with her own parents, which she describes as unpleasant, and as a young woman. The narrator makes it very clear that his family is very progressive and very closely knit. Mary Ann is very proud of her grandchildren, and plays a very large role in their lives up until her death. Will realizes that it is because of her love of books that he will be able to share a great deal about her with her grandchildren long after she is gone. Since Mary Ann is such a warm person, her family circle often extends to very close friends who remain in contact with the family for decades, and Mary Ann can often quickly forge these relationships with people she meets from her professional life. Will seems to share this ability and remains in very constant contact with many people throughout the years that have had impacts on him and his family for various reasons. Mary Ann is certainly surrounded by people who recognize her value as a human being, and receives a great deal of support from these family members and close friends up until the time of her death. A large reason the book was written at all appears to be because of the profound lessons about family that Mary Ann is able to pass on to Will.



## Life

The story is a celebration of the life of Will's mother at its most basic level. Mary Ann leads a very compelling life and impacts others across the world in a very positive way, and Will's recounting of her battle with pancreatic cancer is his way of sharing her with the world at large. Throughout her illness, Mary Ann manages to stay very positive, and even at her sickest she remains oriented towards events with her family or towards business related to the library in Afghanistan, always concerned about making life better for those around her and never complaining about her circumstances since, as she states many times, she has known others who have had to suffer through a great deal more than her. Mary Ann is somewhat modest in this sense, however, because she is able to focus on what matters to her despite the fact that she faces a devastating illness that causes great agony, and she faces this illness without complaint, but instead remains grateful about what she has had throughout her life. Will notices this quality about her, but it is so ingrained in her that he seems either to take it for granted or to nearly view it critically, as though he would rather see her express some degree of pain or remorse than simply continue on as best she can without complaining. Regardless of Will's feelings, Mary Ann does genuinely seem to cope with her illness by continuing on with what matters the most to her, and it seems as though she has always possessed this attitude about the things most important to her in life.

# Style

## Point of View

The point of view of this book is first person, told through Mary Ann's son, Will. The two are very close, and Will is very knowledgeable with respect to his mother's life, so he is often able to provide a context to his mother's outlook on life that would otherwise be lacking. This point of view is important since Will is just as interested in books as his mother, and his mother believes that books are very important to people who wish to learn and grow. The story is mostly exposition, with several summarized conversations between Will and his mother taking place within each chapter, but the chapters are always filled with the books Will and his mother are reading, and Will often learns important things about his mother through the books that she chooses to read in the book club. These books are often summarized within the story and used to explain something about Will's mother or her beliefs. Throughout the novel, events and explanations of events are told through Will's point of view, often with a focus of how they impact his mother, and for the most part, events that are conveyed in the novel effect Mary Ann directly, since the focus of the novel is on her and the books that she shares with Will near the end of her life.

## Setting

The book is set in the early twenty-first century, basically in modern times. The novel takes place mostly on the East Coast of the United States, with many of its scenes taking place inside hospitals as Will waits with his mother for chemotherapy to start. The book is also in large part a description of other books and locations relating to Mary Ann's life. The physical locations aren't typically well-described, but there are a few notable exceptions, especially at the point when Mary Ann agrees to work with a group of nuns with Nina in Thailand, when the description of a given area assumes great importance, and goes a long way towards driving the story. For the most part, the setting revolves around Mary Ann, who is typically in the warm coastal state of Florida, or up in New England with her family. Regardless of where she is, Mary Ann is constantly surrounded by friends and family, and is always well-cared for. People in Will's life ask about her constantly, a testament to how important she is to many.

At one point, early in the book, Mary Ann's tumors begin to shrink rapidly and her doctor suggests that she have a medical procedure that allows her not to require frequent trips to the hospital. This allows her to spend much more time traveling, which she does very often despite the fact that she is sick. As a result, many of these scenes focus on phone conversations Will has with his mother. As the book is a factual account of his last months with his mother, these scenes are important in that they reflect his mother's extremely active nature.



## Language and Meaning

The language of the book is completely straightforward, consisting of modern English without complications. Since the book takes place in modern times in the United States, the language of the book is entirely appropriate to its content. Most of the novel is exposition, and even most of the conversations that Will has with his mother appears to be modified versions of the actual conversations that took place. As such, the dialogue tends to be extremely simple and straightforward, and always readily comprehensible, even when fairly complicated ideas about life and death are introduced. The book appears to desire its appeal to be as broad as possible, so that a simple and straightforward use of language would be the most sensible approach. This being said, the use of very conventional language makes good sense within the context of the story, since it is very likely the way in which Will and his mother communicated, and this should be reflected in a story about their relationship. Since the book keeps its language and meaning straightforward, it is easy to understand and readily accessible.

## Structure

The book is broken down into twenty-eight chapters and an epilogue. Each of the chapters is headed by the title of the most important book Will and his mother read throughout that section of time. The chapters tend to be short, generally no more than eight pages, and some of the chapters are no more than a few pages. Each of the chapters contains more than one book read by Will and his mother, and a great deal of time and energy is spent summarizing many of these books, in some cases taking up the majority of the narrative in a given section. Since this is a book about books, this structure fits well into the book as a whole.

The book is very straightforward, focusing on the books Will and his mother read throughout her illness. Certain other incidents become important throughout the story as well, like Mary Ann's continued efforts towards establishing a library in Afghanistan, and her worries that her friend David return home after he has been captured by terrorists. Other parts of the novel of lesser importance include Will's increasing dissatisfaction with his job and his eventual departure from the publishing industry. These are biographical events that occur during his mother's illness, and do go a long way towards demonstrating her strength of character.



## Quotes

"Our book club got its formal start with the mocha and one of the most casual questions two people can ask each other: "What are you reading?" It's something of a quaint question these days." *Crossing To Safety*, p. 9

"When I was finished with the Bolano, we swapped. Mom was fascinated with *The Savage Detectives*, even if its digressions occasionally maddened her. I think what she liked the most was that it's a book obsessed with writers by a writer who was clearly in love with writing." *Seventy Verses on Emptiness*, p. 30

"On this particular day, there was a woman in line right in front of us. She was in her thirties, smartly but not expensively dressed, wearing dark glasses. When she took them off, you could see she'd been weeping. She was shaking her head. Mom talked to her in a soft voice. Not unusual—Mom talked to everyone and had no hesitation approaching people who were crying, in pain, or in distress." *The Hobbit*, p. 55

"Although O'Reilly is a doctor who rarely keeps you waiting long—she clearly does her best to wait to summon you from the land of the blond wood and upholstery until she's ready—any delay is always tough. Nowhere else does Mom look quite so old or tired or sick as she does while waiting here." *People of the Book*, p. 89

"There's something extraordinary about the first city you love, and many things brought Mom back to London again and again. That Dad loved it too certainly helped. We spent a year there when I was nine and my parents were on sabbatical, and the family vacationed somewhere in the British Isles almost every summer, always with time in London." *The Uncommon Reader*, p. 103

"Mom told me about a lunch that the Women's Commission staff had given her right before she left for Vero Beach. She'd come in to tell everyone about the Afghan project, but the staff turned it into a celebration of Mom's contributions, from the years when she ran the organization and since." *Brat Farrar*, p. 117

"Mom would often talk about a refugee boy she'd met in a hospital in Afghanistan. He was the victim of a land mine and had lost a leg. She said to him that she brought greetings to him from schoolchildren in New York. 'Tell them not to worry about me,' this little boy told her from his hospital bed. 'I still have one leg.'" *The Painted Veil*, p. 139

"The early autumn passed with many good days for Mom, but also plenty of not-so-good ones. It was now almost a full year since she'd been diagnosed. Fever brought her to the hospital more times in quick succession, and again she sometimes had to stay over." *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, p. 152

"Then another of us started to giggle, and then the third. We knew we shouldn't and thought we couldn't help ourselves. We weren't laughing at anything in particular. We were just laughing from high spirits, silliness, anticipation—who knows, probably all





three. The more we tried to stop, the more we giggled. Then we were all laughing simply because we were laughing." *The Price of Salt*, p. 172

"Throughout everything, mom hadn't talked to or met other people with pancreatic cancer. It was tough to do so because most don't last more than a few weeks or months. Now she felt she had met someone else, even if only on television. She would take the tape to Florida, she said, and show the Swayze interview to all her friends there." *The Year of Magical Thinking*, p. 183

"Perhaps because the clock did seem to be ticking much faster and louder than it had over the past two years, we began to read many books at once. So even before we'd both finished the Bolter (a wonderfully quirky book that had just been published and told the true story of a woman who had scandalously, frequently, and impulsively shook up her life in the early decades of the twentieth century in England and Kenya), we were on to a few others, one of which was George Bernard Shaw's 1923 play *Saint Joan*, in an edition that has the more-than-sixty-page preface." *Girls Like Us*, p. 200

"One of the first things everyone noticed about Mariatu Kamara was that she has no hands. You couldn't help but see this as she accepted her award, holding it proudly with her stumps before gently placing it on a table behind her. A gorgeous presence with long braids wrapped like a crown around her head, she spoke in a loud, clear voice, with a distinct African accent, dotted with some Canadian vowel sounds." *The Bite of the Mango*, p. 216

"At the next doctor visit, the news was worse, as we now expected. The disease was progressing. Mom's fevers and lack of energy were now clearly a result of the cancer—as there was no chemo, and she'd finally gotten rid of the C. diff. and other infections." *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, p. 231

"Mom was starting to waste away. She was dramatically thinner and frailer than even a week before, when we'd strolled off to a cafe a few blocks uptown for muffins, and when Mom had been able to talk for hours on camera to a friend in the building who was making a documentary about women who inspired her." *Tears of My Father*, p. 250

"I think Marina got it exactly right. Mom taught me not to look away from the worst but to believe that we can all do better." *Epilogue*, p. 269



## Topics for Discussion

What is Will's reaction when he discovers that his mom has cancer? What does his mom's reaction appear to be?

List three situations from the book that demonstrates Mary Ann's willingness to help people, and explain what each incident says about her character.

Contrast Will's feelings about religion with those of his mother's and his brother Doug's. Is what other ways is his personality different from his mother's?

Why does Mary Ann claim that she is not brave or strong during her illness? Do you agree with her? Why or why not?

Mary Ann continually encourages Will to leave his job in publishing, even though his career prospects are not clear and the country is entering a financial crisis. What makes Mary Ann so certain it is the right thing for Will to do? Is she correct?

Will is very close with his mother, but seems somewhat distant from her in some respects. Name at least one way in which they differ, and briefly describe how he and his mother come to an understanding by the end of the book.

How is it that Mary Ann remains positive despite the fact that she is certain to die? How do people react to her news? How does Mary generally respond to these reactions?

Describe, in your own words, the reason that Mary Ann believes books are so important to people trying to bring about change.

What types of books are Mary Ann and Will most commonly drawn to? Does this choice of book conflict with their personalities? If so, why do they enjoy these particular books?