

## Book Club Discussion Guide

(1) When did you realize the fortunes offered clues about upcoming action?

(2) Throughout the novel, Marissa tells herself she must go back to college to keep Owen safe from the threat of financial insecurity. But the truth is she has ambitions of her own, and feels guilty about pursuing them. Would Nick feel guilty, if the custody division was reversed, and he was in Marissa's position? Discuss society's expectations for women versus men when it comes to work-life balance, and how it affects women's stress levels and self-esteem.

(3) Early in the novel, Lindsay says to Marissa, "Honestly, not every decision I make is in reaction to one you've made," but Lindsay has put a great deal of effort into defining herself as different than Marissa. Talk about sibling dynamics when one can't compete with a higher-achieving one.

(4) Were you as surprised as Marissa to learn of Joey's existence?

(5) When Marissa realizes that she's been blindly accepting the excuses that Owen has offered her, she thinks, *Everything shifts. Like the turn of a kaleidoscope, a pattern that was once clear becomes murky for a moment, then transforms into a new reality.* Have you ever had this type of experience, in which you suddenly perceived a situation in a new light?

(6) Did Belle lead Marissa to Rose in order to help Owen? Is she Marissa's spirit animal? Where do you fall on the Marissa-Lindsay spectrum in your belief in the supernatural?

(7) Consider how age of onset of Joey's disorder affected the trajectory of his life: he was an adult, past the age when Bernie and Rose could legally manage his medical care (without a Court order, a measure of last resort). Now consider Bernie and Rose's levels of education and the dynamics of their marriage. It can be inferred that Bernie was threatened by the stigma of mental illness (To Joel: "Are you calling my son a nutcase, you little *pischer*?") How might that mindset have affected his willingness to seek other avenues of support? Why was Rose susceptible to believing Joey's decline was due to "heartsickness"?

(8) In contrast, what might the trajectory of Owen's life be? His care will be managed by his parents, and their education will presumably be of benefit to him when advocating for support in school. Yet there are still hurdles: they must work as a team, and their relationship is contentious. What if expensive evaluations are needed to make an official diagnosis, and Marissa feels Owen needs them and Nick doesn't? What if they don't agree on Owen's educational, medical, or therapeutic needs?

(9) How did your perspective of Nick change as the book progressed? Of Rose? Lindsay?

(10) Which part of the mystery (the tuned piano, the locked case, the photos) had you the most intrigued?

(11) Lena has the trappings of someone who could be judged as superficial, yet her actions prove otherwise. Discuss how Joey's death affected both Lena and Joel.

(12) Marissa observes that "Lindsay is constantly seeking Truth and Knowledge and Enlightenment, while I am constantly mocking all of the Capital Letters. I can't help it, with some of the sloppy conclusions she comes to sometimes. But it takes more commitment to search than to be snarky." Do you think this assessment of their strengths and weaknesses is accurate?

(13) Forgiveness is a theme that runs through *The Fortune Cookie Writer*. Before forgiving Nick, Marissa thinks, *I have the power to forgive, if I'm ready*. Why is it powerful to forgive someone who has wronged you? How might Rose's life been different, had she been able to forgive Bernie?

(14) The nine hundredth and final fortune is "If your neighbor's plate is empty, even the sweetest plum will taste like rotten fish." Marissa proposes a concert and a dinner once a week in exchange for the piano, a tradition of Rose and Joey's. Do you think Rose feels hopeful (by continuing a beloved tradition with a new "family"), peaceful (by resolving the past through the sharing of Joey's story and piano with Owen), or both?