

Faithful - Discussion Questions

By Alice Hoffman • Questions by the publisher

1. As a group, listen to Leonard Cohen's 'Anthem.' After you've completed the song, discuss why Alice Hoffman opened *Faithful* with the following lyrics: 'Ring the bells that still can ring - Forget your perfect offering - There is a crack in everything - That's how the light gets in.' How do you think this connects to the novel? To Shelby?
2. Love manifests in a few strong ways: the love between a mother and daughter (Shelby and Sue, Maravelle and Jasmine); the love between partners (Ben and Shelby; Sue and Dan); friendship (Shelby and Maravelle). Which love brings the characters the most faith or hope? Is there a sort of love in the novel that you find destructive to the characters?
3. Discuss the title, *Faithful*. In which ways do the characters show their faith? How does this faith differentiate from religious faith? At what point do you think Shelby finally begins to have faith and hope again? Is there another title you and your group members would have selected for the novel?
4. Over the course of the novel, Shelby rescues three dogs, a cat, and steals a poodle for her mother. Discuss the different caretakers that appear in the novel. What compels Shelby to save these animals? What compels Ben to care for Shelby? Shelby for Maravelle?
5. Discuss Shelby's relationship with Ben. In what ways is this relationship a healthy next step for Shelby? Do you think he has a positive or negative affect on her life? Why or why not?
6. While browsing books in the Strand Book Store, a young boy says to Shelby, 'That's why the best heroes used to be villains and vice versa' (page 222). Consider this quote in relation to Shelby's survivor's guilt and redemption by the end of the novel. Does she forgive herself for Helene's death? Why or why not?
7. In the first chapter, Shelby says, 'I believe in tragedy . . . not miracles' (page 11). Does her opinion change by the novel's end? What miracles does she experience?
8. The theme of trust is prevalent in *Faithful*. Discuss the characters who struggle most with trust. Consider the level of trust Maravelle puts in Shelby to watch her kids, Shelby's father's infidelity, Shelby's lack of self-trust, and others who appear in the novel. Where does the lack of trust or ability to trust stem from for the various characters in the novel?
9. On page 201, James says to Shelby, 'What they say about saving a life is true . . . You're responsible for that person forever.' Discuss what James means here and the different ways Shelby's, or another character's, life is saved in *Faithful*. Do you agree with James? Why or

why not?

10. To further the question above, discuss Shelby's visit with Helene toward the novel's end. What 'miracle' do you think she experiences during the visit? What kept her away for so long?

11. As a group, compare the various sayings on all the postcards James left for Shelby throughout the years, as well as when they appear in Shelby's life. What would your reaction be to these notes? Do you think James knew where Shelby was, both physically and mentally, at the time he was writing them?