

READING GROUP GUIDE



THE PEOPLE WE KEEP

ALLISON LARKIN

This reading group guide for **THE PEOPLE WE KEEP** includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.


INTRODUCTION

Little River, New York, 1994. April Sawicki is living in a motorless motorhome that her father won in a poker game. Failing out of school, picking up shifts at Margo's diner, she's left fending for herself in a town where she's never quite felt at home. When she "borrows" her neighbor's car to perform at an open mic night, she realizes her life could be much bigger than where she came from. After a fight with her dad, April packs her stuff and leaves for good, setting off on a journey to find a life that's all hers.

Driving without a chosen destination, she stops to rest in Ithaca. Her only plan is to survive, but as she looks for work, she finds a kindred sense of belonging at Cafe Decadence, the local coffee shop. Still, somehow, it doesn't make sense to her that life could be this easy. The more she falls in love with her friends in Ithaca, the more she can't shake the feeling that she'll hurt them the way she's been hurt.

As April moves through the world, meeting people who feel like home, she chronicles her life in the songs she writes and discovers that where she came from doesn't dictate who she has to be.

This lyrical, unflinching tale is for anyone who has ever yearned for the fierce power of found family or to grasp the profound beauty of choosing to belong.





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TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. When April first performs at the Blue Moon Cafe in chapter 1, she meets an array of quirky characters, including a friendly man named Jim and other fellow performers. Along the rest of April's journey, she is shaped by the people she meets and befriends. Consider the people you've met in your life after moving to a new place, starting a new job, or striking out on your own. Discuss what that felt like. What did you learn about yourself and/or about the world? Did your perspective change?
2. Margo, who owns the local town diner, is the closest thing to a parent the reader is introduced to at the outset of the novel. Having once dated April's father, Margo took April out to lunch after they separated, telling her, "What I want you to remember, girl, is that I'm not breaking up with you." Though Margo was candid when she said this, a young April remembers feeling disheartened by the prospect of more loss in her life. Discuss how loss can shape one's life. Can just the idea of losing someone affect how you respond to building relationships?
3. By chapter 6, it's become abundantly clear to April that she has to leave behind Little River, her selfish father, and her old life, all of which have nothing more to offer her. After her childhood boyfriend Matty turns down the chance to join her, April steals a car and leaves town, calling Margo hours into her drive to let her know. Was April's departure inevitable? If it wasn't, what might staying have looked like? Does April leaving potentially tell us anything about why her mother left years earlier?
4. When April first arrives in Ithaca, she finds a campground where she can stay, meets Carly, and scores an interview to work at Cafe Decadence in a series of events that all seem incidental. Much of what she finds in her foray outside her old world stays with her long after she's moved on. Discuss small, unexpected acts, chance interactions, or seeming coincidences that have changed your life. Can you predict when these meaningful moments will occur?
5. April meets Adam, an architecture student, at the cafe shortly after she begins working there. When she needs a place to stay, he offers his couch. After initially hesitating, she decides to accept his offer. Adam thankfully proves both hospitable and generous, and in the following days, the two grow close. Discuss the likelihood and the risk of this kind of situation, as well as April's decision. How difficult is it to build trust with someone new? Would you accept Adam's offer if you were in April's place?
6. "It's hard to pay attention at work knowing there's a hot shower waiting for me at lunch." April seems overwhelmed by the prospect of having space all to herself after a while on the road. In addition, Adam begins to make her feel more at home in his apartment. "It feels like we're playing house on an old-fashioned TV show . . ." Discuss a time when somebody's kindness felt strange at first.



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7. In chapter 25, April tells Carly she has decided to get a tattoo. She plans to use a drawing of a mayflower that Bodie has sketched for her. Though she hesitates at the last second, choosing a nose piercing instead, Carly later has the design tattooed across her wrist. The mayflower, Carly says, is “the good stuff that comes after too many storms.” Discuss whether or not you’d get a tattoo. What can a tattoo come to mean as you change and grow?
8. As her relationship with Adam becomes romantic, April finds that she can’t tell him the truth about herself, that she’s still underage. Her choice to withhold her age becomes fraught when Adam tells her about his stepmother forcing sex on him at a young age and how that has impacted him greatly. April even goes as far as changing the date of birth on her ID. Discuss why she might have done this. How can the fear of losing something important to you influence your actions?
9. April builds deep, lasting friendships with people who also feel lost and alone. As she grows close with Carly, the cafe manager opens up about her failed relationship, coming out to her parents, and being thrown out of her home. April and Adam even take Carly in for several nights. How does Carly’s experience mirror/differ from April’s? Consider how the two bond over what they share. Who else in the novel shares a lot with April?
10. The campground by the lake is the first place April finds after leaving Little River. She returns more than once in the book, first with Carly, then by herself when she’s older. Discuss the importance of place and time in the novel. What important realizations has April had while at the lake?
11. Rosemary learns of April’s fabricated date of birth on her ID after finding her wallet. Terrified that the truth about her age will be revealed, April makes the heartbreaking decision to leave Ithaca, and Adam and Carly. Consider the shock of being discovered. Is it at all confusing that April leaves? Discuss how this response to fear becomes a habit throughout the novel, how it may even be a kind of comfort for April to leave. Can what April experiences be considered a form of impostor syndrome? What is she an impostor of?
12. In part two, the novel jumps forward three years, and April has made a living on the road, performing in cafes and bars. “*Even though I know it’s just a fairy tale, I keep waiting, waiting for you/To rescue me from the pale.*” Though April’s songs draw from her life, she knows that her audience “make[s] my words mean what they need them to mean.” How does April’s music come to embody her lived experiences? Does she share anything in common with her music? Discuss how art and creativity can encompass personal struggle.



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- 13.** In chapter 33, April reunites with Matty, now an actor going by the name Matthew, in New York. Despite, April says, formerly having “dreams [that] were only as big as a double wide and a job at the factory” before he was discovered, he’s become an Emmy Award-winning soap opera celebrity. April ponders what would have happened had she stayed in Little River, if she would have remained with Matty, deciding that things wouldn’t have changed. Is this necessarily true? Discuss how looking back at her past shapes what leaving has meant to April.
 - 14.** In chapter 35, April takes a road trip to Florida with a college student named Justin, who occasionally lets her crash at his place in Binghamton in exchange for being “his excitement.” Nonchalant about his future, unsure of what he wants to do, and, buckling under career pressure from his father, Justin chooses to join April on the road for spring break. Compare and contrast Justin’s desire to escape with April’s. How do their similarities/differences make April, or you, feel?
 - 15.** Once April arrives in Asheville in chapter 42, she meets Ethan, who is a theatre teacher, while busking. He offers her a room in his house and helps her find work at his friend Robert’s cafe. When he asks about her music, April responds saying that it’s her way of getting by. “Your way of getting by is a lot of people’s dream.” Consider April’s journey thus far. Would she view her path as a desirable one? Discuss how one person’s dreams can differ from another person’s reality. What are some jobs that seem ideal, but are probably different in reality?
 - 16.** Through Ethan, April and Robert grow close and their connection becomes romantic. “I sleep at Robert’s house. All night. I don’t leave before he wakes up. Sex is one thing—just putting parts together. It’s another thing entirely to exist together. Robert is someone I want to exist with.” What does it mean for April to have this realization? Discuss how her perspective on leaving and home has or hasn’t changed at this point in the novel.
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ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. At the end of part one, April leaves Ithaca, believing Adam will discover the truth about her keeping her age a secret from him. Similarly, at the end of part two, afraid the truth of her baby's parentage will hurt Robert and Ethan, April leaves Asheville. Would you leave? Form two groups to discuss: one group should consider why leaving makes sense; the other can work through outcomes of and possibilities for staying.
2. April returns to many of the places she's left at the end of the novel, including Little River, Binghamton, and Ithaca. How have these places changed or remained the same since she's left? Together, name places that have appeared remarkably different after you've returned to them.
3. *The People We Keep* follows April Sawicki's path to finding belonging. After leaving Little River, she learns that home means many things. What are some types of "home" April discovers? Consider what having a home means to you. Go around and have everyone share one example of a kind of home.
4. April's music is both her livelihood and her purest form of expression. Discuss song lyrics that have been meaningful in your life, or try writing your own verse about something in *The People We Keep* that resonated with you.