

Home of the American Circus Reading Group Guide

By Leighellen Landscov of Momma Leighellen's Book Nook and Book Friends Book Club

In the Beginning

What was your first impression of Freya? What was your initial reaction to her choice to return home? Did either of those ideas shift as the novel went on? Why?

The House as Metaphor

The house Freya inherits is falling apart and full of painful memories. In what ways does the physical state of the house mirror Freya's life and relationships? How does the book help broaden or redefine your idea of "home"?

Memory, Trauma, and Nonlinear Narrative

The novel is told through multiple points of view, and Larkin moves back and forth in time, through past memories and events. How does this nonlinear structure affect your reading experience and your understanding of Freya's trauma and healing? Did it ever feel disorienting? Why do you think the author chose this structure?

Legacy, Inheritance, and Generational Wounds

Freya, Jam, Steena, and Aubrey all inherit different kinds of "legacies." How do you see generational trauma playing out in their relationships? Which characters succeed in breaking cycles, and which are bound by them?

The Role of Place and Local Myth

Woven throughout the novel's chapters are tales of the history of Somers, New York, involving the lore of the American circus and Old Bet, the famed elephant. Had you ever heard of Old Bet? Why or why not? How do the historical snippets mirror the journeys of the novel's characters and their stories?

The Bond Between Freya and Aubrey

“Kids don’t need a life where nothing bad happens. What they need is someone who’s there for them WHEN the bad stuff happens.” Explore the relationship between Freya and Aubrey. Was it healthy? What scenes or interactions did you find most pivotal? Were there times you found yourself rooting for one more than the other? Why?

Steena, Villain or Victim

Steena is a difficult and often antagonistic presence, yet Larkin gives her complexity. How do you interpret Steena’s motivations as a mother and sister? Is she a villain, a victim, or both?

Jam, History or Future?

“I delight in being known.” How do you feel about Freya and Jam’s relationship? Is it empowering or enabling? Could they ever have a future?

Silence and Voice

Many characters in the novel hide painful experiences (abuse, neglect, estrangement). Does silence or omission do more harm than good? How might the story have shifted if certain truths had been revealed sooner?

Love and Found Family

Discuss the way the novel explores love in all forms - familial, parental, sibling, self, even the love within a community. How does the idea of “chosen family” contrast with biological family in this novel? How is it expressed in both healthy and harmful ways?

Redemption in Small Acts

Throughout the novel, the characters experience love and loss. How does the novel depict and define redemption? What are some acts of redemption (big or small) that occur throughout the story, including Bet’s journey? Which felt the most redemptive or meaningful to you?

The Ending and New Beginnings

The novel ends with Freya and Aubrey leaving Somers to hike the Appalachian Trail. What was your reaction to this ending? Do you see it more as an escape, a healing gesture, or a step towards something new? What do you think is next for them?

Book Club Meal Idea: Make Freya’s Pasta “Fazool”

***A Note from Allison:** The classic Italian dish, *pasta e fagioli* is an elegantly economical way to serve a hearty, homecooked meal to guests—which makes it perfect for a cozy book club gathering. Since I have always made fazool from feel, I don’t have a written recipe to share with you. Thankfully, my dear friend Alice generously offered hers. What I love about Alice’s recipes is how she gives us the foundation for the dish but also allows plenty of room for improvisation (which, in my opinion, is what fazool is all about). Add all of your favorite soup vegetables and aromatics or keep it simple and use what you have on hand. You can serve fazool as a pasta bowl or add extra tomato sauce and pasta water to turn it into a soup. For a vegan option, you can substitute ground salted cashews, or nutritional yeast for parmesan cheese.*

The Authentic Pasta and Fagioli (Pasta with Beans)

Recipe by Alice Carbone Tench, from her book, [Eating Again: The Recipes That Healed Me](#)

For 4 People

Preparation: 15 minutes

Cooking Time: 15-20 minutes + 20-25 minutes if using dry beans

320 gr. (11.3 oz) short pasta

Your favorite beans, either canned or dry. If using dry beans, soak them for at least 6 hours. If canned, use 1 can.

1 carrot

1 leek

1 clove of garlic (whole)

1 tomato or 1 cup of tomato sauce

Extra-virgin olive oil, salt, rosemary, pepper and chili flakes to taste

Cook the beans if you have chosen to use dry ones (I cook them in the pressure cooker for 15 minutes after soaking them overnight). In the pressure cooker I put: 1 carrot, 1 onion, 1 celery stick, 1 sprig of rosemary 1 bay leaf, 1 clove of garlic, and a diced tomato. Or you can choose canned beans to add after all the aromatics are cooked.

If you don't have a pressure cooker, use a stockpot. It will take a little longer, but won't change the result.

Dice the vegetables, finely chop the aromatics, and sauté in extra virgin olive oil for 5-8 minutes.

Add beans and either chopped tomato or tomato sauce to the vegetables and sauté for 5 minutes.

Cook pasta al dente in boiling, salted water, and add some of the cooking water to the beans to help create a nice sauce. Remove garlic.

Add pasta to beans and vegetables, mix well and serve with plenty of parmesan cheese on top.

Chili flakes are optional, but I love them.

Thank you so much for choosing Home of the American Circus for your book club! If you've enjoyed using this Reading Group Guide and making Alice's recipe, please post photos of your gathering and your meal on Instagram and tag us so we can see! Allison (@allielarkinwrites), Leighellen (@mommaleighellensbooknook) and Alice (@alicecarbonetench)