

Book Club/Discussion Questions for Bone Knowing

These are divided into two sections: General Questions and Specific Questions referring to passages from the book: The A. question pertains to the characters in the book and the B. question applies to your own life.

General Questions:

1. How does Jen and Tom's relationship change as Tom's health declines? What about through his "officially" dying process and after his death?
2. How can giving and receiving help be mutual? If you were seriously ill, would you consider letting people help?
3. How did Tom's health & coping choices support and contradict his "being all about living"?
4. How does Jen experience anticipatory grief (grief that happens in anticipation of a loss) of Tom's eventual death to illness and Scott's eventual death to suicide?
5. Jen is incongruent with her work in the helping profession, not able to take her own advice. How does she move into "walking her talk"?
6. Bone knowing has Jen choosing to begin a relationship with Tom despite the mess it could end up with his cancer/age/divorce status/ bankruptcy. Have you ever made a choice that defied reason?
7. Though they are open about many things, Jen and Tom stumble over the "difficult conversations" having to do with end-of-life planning. Have you had this conversation with your loved one? Why or why not? Do you believe it helps to have this before you or your loved one is sick/dying?
8. What was your favorite section of the book: Seasons, Months, Days or After Tom? Why?

Specific Passage Questions:

1. Rock climbing is more than the sport Jen and Tom began a relationship with, it is also a metaphor for what is to come and a teacher of lessons. (pgs. 16-19)

- A. What does the experience of rock climbing show us about Jen and Tom as people? How does it foreshadow their eventual relationship with an illness in the background?
- B. How do the lessons learned in rock climbing: “*Anything but in-your-face present time is apt to let in panic.*” and “*Just take what is here and trust the next move.*” (pg. 18), help Jen later in the story? (pgs. 157, 208, 237, 275)

2. (pg 30) “*We take our turns down-climbing into the black void. When it’s my turn, I’m surprised that I feel absolute peace. The change in temperature as I move into the shadow of the moon, the feel of every slight outcropping under my palms, the smell of cooling rock—even the subtle shades of darkness—are vivid and envelope me completely. To die, or not to die, is no longer the question. There is no question. I move slowly now, giving this peace a chance to absorb. It’s a strange phenomenon that the closer we get to safety, my affection for the “not to die” option grows. Many pitches later, we make it to the valley floor and begin joking about how well it worked out that Ed is “Mr. Responsible” and Tom has cancer. Living quickly returns to top priority. Only now I know that Tom’s death, or even my own, for that matter, won’t kill me.*”

- A. What do you think Jen experienced that causes dying to become irrelevant and then return to top priority?
- B. Have you ever experienced a state that seemed “beyond death’s relevance”?

3. Jen and Tom pay attention to “signs”. In the vignette about Tom’s experience with the Czech healer, they both want to find a different answer than those the healer gave and look to Tom’s luck at the casino as a sign (pg. 44): “*He wins big. He’ll live. Healer, schmealer. And then he loses big. He’ll die. The healer man has a knack for knowing. It goes back and forth all night and I’m exhausted by the roller coaster of hope and fear. In the end, he breaks even and I’m glad he knows when to walk.*”

- A. When the signs fluctuate: he’ll live/he’ll die, Jen indicates this parallels her experience with her hopes and fears (about his illness). What are the implications of “breaking even” and “knowing when to walk” in regards to Tom’s cancer?
- B. How do you interpret luck – random happening or a “sign”?

4. Tom’s treatment days interrupt their “dream” abroad, giving them both a reality check: (pg 50) “*We spend the evening exercising our creative juices. I feel an unusual ease; a clean emptiness that comes when something dreaded is realized and it’s nothing like the monster it was imagined to be. Cancer is a condition, fleeting or not, that lives in the man I love. That’s it.*”

- A. How does facing the reality of Tom’s condition via administering his treatment, help Jen feel a “clean emptiness”?
- B. How do you tend to handle dreaded realities in your own life?
5. Jen’s experience of time changes throughout the story. How do you perceive the change in the following examples?
- A. The experience of bone knowing when meeting Tom: *“The man standing in front of me whose hand is still holding mine in a time warp of milliseconds is significant.”* (pg 7) and when meeting Nick later in the story: *“Time is stubbed upon our contact, breaking itself up into frames: Hand. Warm. Man. Orange. Deep sound.”* (pg.182)
- B. Tom’s cancer going into remission: *“Time passes as if there is an endless amount of it. Days float into weeks and then months . . . There is comforting normalcy in taking it for granted. We slip into the day-to-day living with an assumed future, postponing visits and “I love you”s.”* (pg 57)
- C. The shift from ordinary to sacred as Jen cuts off Tom’s braid: *“Time moves much slower than the pace I am accustomed to. Every sense is heightened . . .”* (pg. 148)
- D. When the hospice doctor announces Tom has only days: *“Wait just a minute! I’m not ready . . . I feel like a top spinning recklessly close to the edge of a table that someone has just put their hand on to stop.”* (pg. 227)
- E. Tom’s drawn out dying process: *“Time is messing with me, slowing down when I want it to hurry up and moving ahead in leaps that leave me spinning.”* (pg. 242) and *“I want time to stop. And I want it to fast-forward me past this torturous anticipation of losses. Conflicting wants stretch me in different directions . . . I try to freeze the machine on “wanting time to stop,” so I can be with my family right now—as is.”* (pg. 253)
6. Anticipatory grief is experienced before a loss. Jen refers to this as the “elephant in the room” or the “pea under the mattress”: *“What Amy doesn’t know and what Tom hides so well, is that once death has become a real possibility—an untimely one—there’s no going back to the naïve notion of immortality. I have seen that elephant and felt that hard pea for a long time . . . The low-grade angst of anticipating a loved one’s death and pulling all stops to try and prevent it was my dance with Scott; only his death threat was not from cancer . . . Suicide was the ace up his sleeve.”* (pg. 60)
- A. How was Jen’s anticipatory grief different with Tom (due to illness) than with Scott (due to suicide threat)?
- B. Is there an anticipated loss in your life you are grieving under cover? (It doesn’t have to be loss by death).
7. When Jen loses Scott, she realizes an alternative to closing her heart to such possible pain in the future: *“Scott’s death has cracked open a thick, crusted layer over my heart that has held so many feelings at bay. The Velveteen Rabbit, from one of my favorite childhood books, keeps coming to mind. My heart, like that inanimate toy, comes alive as*

I listen and attend to it. As it awakens, my love for Tom becomes more vivid. I let myself fall deeper into him with faith that I'll make it through the loss if and when it comes to that.”(pg 66)

- A. How does Jen's pain over losing Scott open her heart to Tom?
- B. Do you believe that the depth of feeling pain corresponds to the depth of feeling joy/love? How is this true or not for you?

8. *“... I cry joy. The nectar of my life overwhelms me at times. There is something about birth, with the awareness of death that is so beautiful I can't contain it. Both my body and my heart brim over. For moments at a time, I find myself in the place just between joy and pain, where the two become indiscernible.”*

- A. What does Jen mean by “birth with the awareness of death” being beautiful?
- B. How do you experience (or imagine) the place between joy and pain?

9. Throughout the story, Jen experiences a spiritual crisis and transformation. Comment on her relationship to God in the three passages below. Do any of these parallel your relationship with God at some point in your life?

- A. *“I resort to the God of my youth with prayers that I'd have scoffed at from the safety of my latest theories. The “Universe” that had taken his place in my late adolescence is too big for personal accountability. My pleading needs a force with a bearded face. All right, I get it. I'm supposed to be with him. So I'll respect the cues you shoot through my bones if you do your part and let him be healthy. Let him live. Please? I'll be your best fan. I'll convert, repent, and praise you on street corners—whatever it takes . . . Negotiations with the Daddy-God are ongoing.” (pg 35)*
- B. *“The curtain's been pulled, the gig is up: no personal God. All the things that have happened that I'm tempted to classify as either sunshine or shadow: He loves me, he loves me not—well, those are all just life in its grand complexity doing its thing. Nothing personal. The love in my very own heart gives me more of what I expect from God than any return on prayers—the pleading ones anyhow. I've decided there's nothing like a good crisis of faith to bring one into one's own humanity. And maybe this is where the God-mystery has been hiding out all along.” (pgs 119-120)*
- C. *“With palms pressed in prayer at heart-level, I bow deeply to Tom's spirit, to the mountain peaks, to the ashes swirling below the silver surface, and to the knowing in my bones. All are God speaking.” (pg 334)*

10. Tom is the “positive attitude guru” until he becomes disillusioned:

“Nothing wrong with a positive attitude, that is until it holds one hostage from the truth. Then it has become a good thing gone awry. We are both beginning to recognize the steep cost of glossing over what is really going on inside for fear that

anything short of a bright-shiny outlook may give the nay-saying illness an upper hand.” (pg 123) and

“Ironic, but it’s turning us into rebels against good attitudes. Anything glossing over what is real, even the ugly, escalates our cause and turns my ears beet-red. I’m just a hair away from standing up and screaming at Ms. Goodie-Thinking-Minister that she’s missing the point. Every word out of her mouth implies Tom’s failure. It only takes one good success story; the kind when the person pops off their death bed and into full recovery, to set up a dying person for a million if-only-you-do-this-or-try-that’s from well-meaning people who just can’t stand to let death happen, as it will, to us all.” (pg 150)

- A. How did Tom’s “positive attitude” paint him into a corner?
- B. Do you think there is a downside to a positive attitude?

11. Tom miraculously finds the golden egg on Easter and Jen begs to know how:

*“How do you think you found it?” I ask.
He laughs to himself. “I stopped looking.”
Ah, so that’s how it works. (pg 163)*

- A. What does Tom’s explanation imply about his spiritual development?
- B. Have you had an experience of surrender that had a surprising result?

12. *“She is so sharp and together—like I was at one time and maybe still would be if only Tom had stayed in remission. These thoughts have me caught in a downward spiral. Before long I’m jealous of everyone who doesn’t have a sick husband. It’s getting ugly. I dread coming home to other people in our house when I can’t hold together a social façade for a moment longer. I resent having to trade our privacy for help at a time when I want to hide in a closet and scream.” (pg186)*

- A. At a time when Jen needs help the most, she begins to resent it. Why?
- B. Has jealousy or comparing yourself to others ever caused you suffering?

13. *“How strange to know each last of a lifetime— lucky and unlucky. Tom raises his fists over his head and we all begin clapping and hooting. Today it’s lucky” (pg 193)*

- A. How is it lucky for Tom to know each last? Unlucky?
- B. Do you think knowing the likely year of your death would be lucky or unlucky? Why?

14. *“Our brief window of opportunity makes it evident how my precious little boy has taken a backseat to the daily crisis of getting by with a sick spouse. He’ll soon take it again, when this baby inside me will divide my attention even further. I’m not the mother I intended to be. There just isn’t enough of me to go around. More than guilt, I feel helpless. All of my efforts won’t change my son’s losses. A large chunk of hope is reserved in my heart for River being okay down the line.” (pg. 202) Jen knows she set up*

her son for losses when she originally chose to have children and she is feeling the implications of her choice.

- A. What kind of mother did Jen intend to be? Could she be that in this situation?
- B. Do you believe it is fair to bring a child into a situation where it will likely lose a parent?

15. *“Two weeks into official dying and Tom is only interested in liquids. Dr. Miller guesses he might last weeks if he keeps up a steady flow of them. It surprises even her that he’s plugging on. His name on the board at work will likely outlive all the other cases whose names are one-by-one becoming smudges of dry-erase marker. In the trenches of all it means to have his name still up there, I find myself disappointed—scared, really. I’m afraid I’ll run out of care before he dies.”*(pg 240)

- A. What does Jen mean by the trenches of Tom’s name still being on the board at work?
- B. Do you think it is possible to run out of care?

16. *“Love goes beyond the body. Love. Pure love. The kind that Rumi speaks of in a poem I remember of his about meeting in a field beyond right and wrong. Love—beyond the practical dilemmas of bringing home the bacon and frying it up in a pan, beyond the struggles of personality differences, preferences, child-rearing styles, and relationship dynamics. There are wings on my back as I let this love permeate through me. It feels like dreams I’ve had of soaring down low over meadows of purple lupine.*

Ecstatic peace. My greatest prayer is that this is what it is like for Tom as he orients to spirit.” (pg 279)

- A. How is it that Jen can feel this kind of love only once Tom has died?
- B. What do you consider “pure love”?

17. *“I’ll always love you, Tom. That never changes.*

But you aren’t here.

He winces for a millisecond and returns to an even smile.

I love someone who is here, Tom—someone who I can share a life with, who can raise these babies with a father. You know love isn’t bound to one person in a lifetime. Louise is proof you understand. The love between you, even now—it’s palpable. It’s what keeps her and me in each other’s lives.” (pg. 331)

- A. How does knowing Tom loved his first wife help Jen connect to her?
- B. Do you think Jen’s communication with Tom after his death is “wishful thinking” or a genuine connection beyond the grave?