



6700 Merle Hay Road, Johnston, IA 50131 • Voice: 515-278-5233 • Fax: 515-278-4975 • info@johnstonlibrary.com

Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Truth and Beauty by Ann Patchett

Summary

What happens when the person who is your family is someone you aren't bound to by blood? What happens when that person is not your lover, but your best friend? In her frank and startlingly intimate first work of nonfiction, *Truth & Beauty*, Ann Patchett shines light on the little-explored world of women's friendships and shows us what it means to stand together.

Ann Patchett and Lucy Grealy met in college in 1981, and after enrolling in the Iowa Writer's Workshop began a friendship that would be as defining to both of their lives as their work. In her critically acclaimed memoir, *Autobiography of a Face*, Lucy Grealy wrote about the first half of her life. In *Truth & Beauty*, the story isn't Lucy's life or Ann's life but the parts of their lives they shared together. This is a portrait of unwavering commitment that spans 20 years, from the long cold winters of the Midwest to surgical wards to book parties in New York. Through love, fame, drugs and despair, this is what it means to be part of two lives that are intertwined.

This is a tender, brutal book about loving the person we cannot save. It is about loyalty and about being lifted up by the sheer effervescence of someone who knew how to live life to the fullest.

Discussion Questions

1. Ann and Lucy shared a deep and intimate bond. Is it only possible to form a relationship like that in early adulthood -- before careers are fully formed and long-term romantic relationships and children enter the picture? In what ways are our relationships with friends different than ones with our family members? Are they always different?
2. How does Lucy's struggle with illness and her own body shape her way of dealing with life and with the people around her? Lucy was an enormously talented writer. Did she use that gift as a way to make sense of life? Do you think writers and artists see the world differently, or more clearly, than other people?
3. Ann chose to write about their friendship in a very frank and intimate way -- to pay tribute to Lucy's life and their whole relationship by recording the moments of triumph and joy, as well as the times of anguish and despair. Would you have the courage to be so honest?

4. The writer's life seems to require a magical gift or creative spirit and incredible drive and focus. Are these qualities contradictory or complementary? What do you think enables writers to persevere through the years of "night jobs" in restaurants and bakeries while they work to realize their dream?

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