

Where the Light Fell



Book Club Kit

PHILIP
YANCEY

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. At its heart, *Where the Light Fell* is a coming-of-age memoir. What other such memoirs have you read and enjoyed, and why? How was Philip Yancey's story different? Which parts resonated with you, and which were hard to read (if any)?
2. "Not until college do I discover the secret of my father's death," writes Yancey at the beginning. It is a revelation that suddenly casts his life in a different light. How do you deal with difficult memories, especially family secrets? What challenges have you faced confronting them? Where do you find comfort in trying times?
3. "I feel torn inside, torn between the gentle mother who hovers by my bedside when I get sick and the mother who punishes me when I least expect it." Mildred is a formidable presence in this memoir. How do you feel about her? The trauma she inflicts on her children is difficult to process, and her moods often "burst without warning like a summer thunderstorm." Why do you think she acted that way to her sons? Was there any redemption at the end of the book?
4. "For much of our upbringing [my brother] Marshall and I had an uneasy alliance. We argued, we competed, we sometimes snitched on each other." But later on they "banded together as comrades and confidants." How would you describe their older/younger brother dynamic? Why do you think their paths diverged, and what kept their relationship close? If you have a sibling, how would you characterize your relationship?
5. "Reading gave me wings," writes Yancey, recounting the spark of discovery he found between the pages of books. Do you remember the first book your parent read to you, or that you read on your own? What are your favorite books from childhood or adolescence? Did one in particular change your life, or change the way you thought about an issue?
6. Mitchell Elementary opened Yancey's eyes to science, which worried his mother. "Be careful," she says. "They'll tell you stuff about evolution and dinosaurs that contradicts the Bible. You can't believe everything they teach in school these days." Both the author and his brother experience crises of faith at the Bible college. Is education the enemy of religion? Why or why not?
7. In the memoir, Yancey gravitates toward the writings of Augustine of Hippo, a philosopher and theologian who celebrates the goodness of created things. Of his pre-conversion years, Augustine writes, "I had my back toward the light, and my face toward the things on which the light falls." What does this phrase mean to you? Why do you think Yancey titled his memoir *Where the Light Fell*?
8. "I'm not sure I'm saved," Yancey's brother confesses one night. "I certainly feel no calmness or peace. . . . I've never had the sensation of being caught up in something supernatural, something greater than myself. . . . How do you know what's fake and what's real?" This theme is threaded throughout the memoir, what is real and what is fake, when it comes to the spiritual life. What has your experience been? How would you describe your own spiritual path, if any?
9. When learning the truth behind the origins of the Civil War, Yancey writes: "As a Southerner, coming of age for me included a dawning awareness that we were living with a story that was self-deceiving, a lie. . . . As I grew older, a crack opened up in what I had always been taught to believe." Is there any part of your region's history that you have revisited and now see from a different perspective? Is there a current controversy that challenges old beliefs?
10. During the 1964 election year, Yancey joins the Young Republicans for Goldwater committee and on Fourth of July attends a Patriots' Rally Against Tyranny event, where he hears George Wallace speak, among others, and Black protesters are beaten.

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“A chill has settled over my skin,” Yancey writes, “memories of that scene linger in the air, like a bad smell that won’t go away.” Do you see any parallels between that time and today in matters of race and politics? How much has changed, and what still needs to be done?

11. The author often finds solitude while communing with nature: “A muskrat’s nose cuts V-shaped ripples in the pond’s glassy surface. I watch a spotted fawn approach the water, eyes and ears alert, and warily lower its head for a drink. A gangly blue heron, taller than a child, lands gently by the pond’s edge and wades in on stilt legs to stand at stiff attention. They take my breath away.” What places in the natural world do you like to visit and why do they bring you peace of mind? Describe that place through all the five senses.

12. When Yancey takes his mother to a beach house in South Carolina, he speaks with her about grace and the power of forgiveness. If you’re comfortable with sharing, where has grace entered your life and what was the circumstance? Who in your life would you most like to forgive?

13. Near the end of the book, Yancey asks: “What happened to tear apart our small family?” What do you think tore the family apart?

14. “We live day by day, scene by scene,” Yancey writes, “as if working on a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle with no picture on the box to guide us.” What picture would your puzzle form? What’s the image that reflects your life and its values?

15. How did *Where the Light Fell* make you reflect on your own life?

“You’ll be the first person since the sixth grade to hear me perform.”

Music plays a powerful role in *Where the Light Fell*. Yancey plays the piano to woo the young woman who would later become his wife. “I adjust the Steinway bench and Janet finds a spot on the floor, tucked behind a chair, out of sight from anyone who might walk by. My hands are shaking. For weeks I’ve been practicing Beethoven’s *Sonata Pathétique*, and must screw up all my courage to attempt such a piece, even for an audience of one.”

Find Beethoven’s *Sonata Pathétique* on Spotify and play it for yourself or for the book club. How does it make you feel? What emotions does this piece bring out in you? Are there other pieces (classical or otherwise) that particularly move you?

Some other Spotify selections to immerse yourself in . . .

Schubert’s *Trout Quintet*

Liszt’s *Transcendental Études*

Yo-Yo Ma performing Bach’s *Solo Cello Suite*

A “SUBVERSIVE” READING LIST

“In my advanced literature classes, other books wield a different power . . . draw me out of the church bubble I live in and . . . expose me to ideas and realms I didn’t know existed. I feel like a virgin reader, and a subversive one, wondering if it’s sinful to read such books. I am encountering backgrounds wholly unlike mine.”

“I read Chaucer and wish I was one of those pilgrims swapping bawdy stories on the road with friends and strangers.”

The Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer
1984 and *Animal Farm* by George Orwell
Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse

“I read Hemingway and want to enlist.”

A Farewell to Arms by Ernest Hemingway

“I read *Return of the Native* and fall in love with love.”

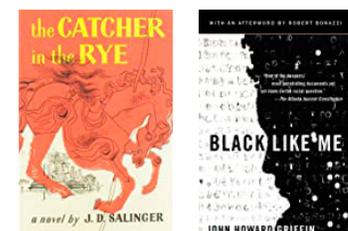
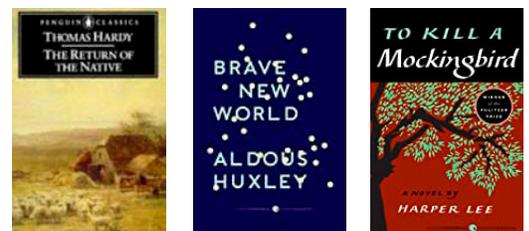
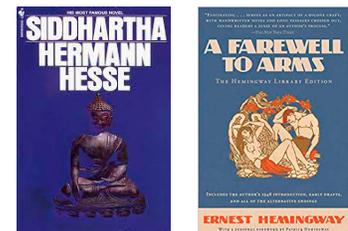
The Return of the Native by Thomas Hardy
Brave New World by Aldous Huxley
To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

“I read Salinger and long for the courage to act out the insolence that simmers inside me.”

The Catcher in the Rye by J. D. Salinger

“My thoughts about race . . . come to a head when I read the new book, *Black Like Me*, by journalist John Howard Griffin.”

“Timidly at first, then greedily, I find books like *Native Son* by Richard Wright, *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.”



IN THE SPIRIT OF GIVING

HABITAT FOR HUMANITY

[habitat.org](https://www.habitat.org)

Helps families build and improve places to call home. Believes affordable housing plays a critical role in strong and stable communities.

FOCUSED COMMUNITY STRATEGIES

[fcsministries.org](https://www.fcsministries.org)

Empowers communities to thrive, investing deeply in one under-resourced Atlanta neighborhood at a time.

BUCKHEAD CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

[buckheadchristianministry.org](https://www.buckheadchristianministry.org)

Intervenes in the lives of individuals and families in crisis, and provides supportive housing, financial education, debt remediation, and savings matches.

ATLANTA COMMUNITY FOOD BANK

[acfb.org](https://www.acfb.org)

On a mission to end hunger in Atlanta.

THE TURTLE HOSPITAL

[turtlehospital.org](https://www.turtlehospital.org)

A small non-profit organization dedicated to the rehabilitation of endangered sea turtles.



CONVERGENT