

GHOSTS OF HARVARD

A novel

*Book
Club
Kit*

FRANCESCA SERRITELLA

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

Thank you for choosing *Ghosts of Harvard* for your book club. I know the pressure I feel when it's my turn to pick a book for my book club, and I'm honored you chose mine.

Book clubs have long held a special place in my heart. For the last fifteen years, my mother and I have hosted an annual party at our home for book club readers. What started out as twenty people in our living room, for whom I baked chocolate chip cookies, has now grown to 1,000 book club readers split over two days who join us for a catered lunch and massive big-tent book club meeting. (Yes, it's still at our home, and of course, completely free of charge. Because in my family, when we want to thank someone, we invite them over and feed them carbohydrates.)

I can honestly say it is my favorite event of every year, because it is always a pleasure to meet such smart, compassionate, engaging people. Please visit my website, FrancescaSerritella.com, for details on how to qualify for this year's party. I'd love to see you there.

Please enjoy these supplementary materials—some of which contain **spoilers**—as you create your own unique reading experience among your friends. I hope these discussion questions lead to insights into the book and into your own lives. I wish I could join your conversation, but the book doesn't belong to me anymore, it's yours. Thank you again for letting the voices in my head join your book club.

Sincerely,
Francesca Serritella

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. College is often called “the happiest time” in a person’s life, but it can also be a stressful period of transition and pressure. In what ways are the anxieties Cady has going into college unique, and in what ways are they typical? What kinds of pressures are on young people today? Which were unique to you or your generation? Did anything about Serritella’s description of life at Harvard surprise you? Would you want to attend Harvard or send your child there?
2. In the book, Cady is haunted by Harvard’s past inhabitants, literally and figuratively, and burdened by the expectations of the future. Is there any time or place in your life where you felt the weight of history? What about a time in your life where you felt the pressure of high expectations? Did you feel motivated to rise to the occasion, or paralyzed by fear of failure?
3. Potential is a theme in this novel: the potential of genius, the pressure to live up to that potential, the potential of a predisposition to mental illness, the potential thwarted by slavery, discrimination, and war. In our culture, we love prodigies, wunderkind, and rising stars. Why is potential so fascinating and prized in our culture? Is it over-valued? Psychologists say it is generally easier to imagine positive outcomes rather than negative ones. Is that true for you?
4. At the outset of the novel, Cady’s identity has been shaken by the illness and loss of her brother, her hero. Her role in her family has also changed; once in the background, she is now the focus of her parents’ attention and concern. Do you think people get assigned roles in their family? Did that happen to you or your children? How do the stories families tell, and the stories we tell ourselves, shape our identity and expectations? Have you ever had to challenge those personal narratives or family myths?
5. Cady believes the voices she’s hearing are ghosts. On the other hand, she’s a lonely girl under acute emotional distress from a family with a history of mental illness. Do you think the ghosts are real, or is Cady suffering from auditory hallucinations? Why do you think so?
6. Cady likens the nature of the ghosts to visiting her childhood home years later, where “she could hear Eric’s little-boy voice echoing around the stairwell. Her family’s past selves were captured between those walls, preserved in memory, like an insect in amber.” Later, Cady co-opts a theoretical physics concept about hidden dimensions in which space-time “folds over” to explain it. Do you believe in ghosts, or have you ever had a paranormal experience? If so, what is your “theory” of ghosts, what they’re like, and how they reach us? Do you agree with Whit that “ghosts don’t haunt the living. We haunt them?”
7. Cady regrets her role in what she believes was the turning point in Eric’s life that set him on a course of self-destruction. Although in reality, his life story wasn’t as simple a narrative as she thought. In what ways are the three ghosts at turning points in their own lives and at turning points in American history? How are they examples of potential thwarted? In retrospect, what was a turning point in your life?
8. Cady is haunted by those what-if scenarios: *what if* she could have said or done something different with her brother, could his death have been prevented? She carries those alternate realities in her mind and tortures herself with *what could have been*. She longs to rewrite history, and the ghosts initially seem to offer that chance—but it can never be done. Do you have any what-if parallel universes in your mind? Life with an ex-partner, a different career, a different life choice? Have you ever compared yourself or your choices to a hypothetical alternative? Is that fair to do?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (continued)

9. As the novel states, “history is never as simple a narrative as we write in books.” With controversies over Confederate monuments, Christopher Columbus, and the slave-holding history of lauded figures and institutions, we’re in a cultural moment where we’re challenging long-held histories. Is this upheaval necessary? Why is it painful to let go of idealized versions of historical figures or places? Did learning that Harvard’s leadership once participated in slavery change your perspective on the school? Which is more powerful, fact or fiction? Is a comforting lie ever preferable to a brutal truth?
10. Cady is haunted by *why* Eric killed himself. She goes to Harvard looking for answers, while suffering under the secret belief that it was her fault. By the end of the book, we learn other characters have traced their own lines of responsibility in Eric’s death. Can one simple narrative be accurate? What do you think were contributing factors to Eric’s suicide? Could his death have been prevented? Have you ever made a decision where you were confident of your assessment, only to later learn you didn’t have all the relevant information?
11. Sadly, suicide is the second-leading cause of death among people aged 10-24. Why do you think young people today might be at greater risk of suicide than in past decades? Are colleges doing enough to provide adequate mental health services to students? Do the privacy laws excluding parents from the medical care of their children, legally adults, help or hurt students’ wellbeing?
12. Is grieving a suicide more difficult than other types of loss? If so, why? How can we better support those who have lost someone to suicide and dispel the unfair stigma?
13. The phrase Cady hears at the Sever entrance whispering wall, “It takes only an error to father a sin,” is a genuine quote from the real Robert Oppenheimer. What do you think it means? Can you see how it applies to Oppenheimer’s life, both in the novel and in history? Do you think it applies to Cady’s story? What about your own? Are we responsible for all the unintended consequences of our actions?
14. Robert tells Cady, “I labor under my awful fact of excellence as if I am bound for extraordinary things. But even if, in the end, I’ve got to satisfy myself with testing toothpaste in a lab, I don’t want to know till it has happened.” This is snippet of dialogue is a quote from a genuine letter Robert Oppenheimer wrote during his Harvard days. Do you agree with him? If you could know your future, would you want to?
15. At the end of the novel, Cady thinks to herself, “Now she understood that we must love people whom we cannot control, in fact we are lucky to love and be loved by people we cannot control. If we could control the person, love wouldn’t be a gift.” What do you think of this observation? Do you think you can control or influence your loved ones? Have you ever been frustrated by a loved one making a choice you didn’t agree with? Do you ever put pressure on yourself and your behavior, as if your actions could influence someone else’s? Does love ever mean letting go of control?
16. People often say “Hindsight is 20/20,” but is this true? In the novel, Robert argues that our feelings about the end result color our perception of the past, so it’s “poor scientific method.” And in listening to the minister’s sermon at the end, Cady reflects on the “inherent incompleteness of any single perspective.” What do you think? Should we be more compassionate with ourselves, even, or especially, in hindsight?

RECIPE: ROBERT'S BLACK AND TAN

“Don’t talk to me about health with whatever you’ve got there. What do you call that, a poor-man’s pain au chocolat?”

“What? It’s just toast—” Cady stopped, suddenly at a loss for words. She was looking down at her plate bewildered to find a piece of toast with peanut butter and a squiggle of chocolate syrup. She was seeing it for the first time.

...

Pardon me, but you’re eating my black and tan.

Ingredients:

- Sliced bread
- Peanut butter
- Chocolate syrup

Instructions:

You don’t have to be a genius to make Robert’s favorite dining hall treat. To make your own, toast a piece of bread, then spread peanut butter on top (crunchy or creamy—your choice). Top it off with a squiggle of chocolate syrup.

Eat a slice on your own as you read, or cut each piece of toast into strips for a salty and sweet snack for the whole book club.

PLAYLIST

Jam to the novel’s soundtrack during your book club meeting! [This Spotify playlist](#) features the songs in the book—from Ranjoo’s pregame music and Cady’s choir songs to Whit’s jazz standards—plus others that inspired Francesca Serritella during the writing process. Here’s a sampling below:

“Truth Hurts” by Lizzo

“Happy Days Are Here Again”
by Ben Selvin & His Orchestra

“Stormy Weather” by Ethel Waters

“Abendlied” by Cambridge Singers

“Paranoid Android” by Radiohead

“Betty Co-Ed” by Rudy Vallee

“Mood Indigo” by Duke Ellington

“Oxford Comma” by Vampire Weekend

“All of Me” by Louis Armstrong

Listen to the full [playlist on Spotify](#).

FURTHER READING ON HARVARD HISTORY AND THE CHARACTERS

Warped Passages: Unraveling the Mysteries of the Universe's Hidden Dimensions by Lisa Randall

Knocking on Heaven's Door by Lisa Randall

Robert Oppenheimer: Letters and Recollections, edited by Alice Kimball Smith and Charles Weiner

American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin

The Airships Akron & Macon: Flying Aircraft Carriers of the United States Navy by Richard K. Smith

Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America's Universities by Craig Steven Wilder

To access the booklet by Sven Beckert, Katherine Stevens, and the students of the Harvard and Slavery Research Seminar and other helpful resources, visit www.HarvardandSlavery.com.

EAT LIKE A HARVARD STUDENT

Clover: Admire the collegiate tiles from 1912 while you eat the fast food of the future.

Daedalus: A perfect bar, but if you're not with Nikos, they do check ID.

Henrietta's Table: Enjoy fine dining, as long as your parents pay.

Mr. Bartley's Burger Cottage: A Harvard institution with a side of fries.

Tealuxe: Unfortunately, **Tealuxe closed** at the end of 2018. This book exists in the parallel universe where Tealuxe never closes, apologies to this dimension.

Felipe's Mexican Taqueria: Fuel your all-nighter with a burrito the size of your head.

Darwin's: The best sandwich shop in Cambridge, and if you don't like the crew going, DoorDash delivers.

Berryline: Forget your roommate troubles and get fro-yo like Andrea.

The Kong: Food comes hot, with or without a final club punch to deliver it.

Mike's Pastry: Biting into that crunchy cannoli shell is worth looking like a powdered-sugar ghost.

Grafton Street: A beautiful restaurant to stall going back to your dorm.

Insomnia Cookies: Find a drop, reward yourself with a cookie.

L.A. Burdick Chocolate Shop: Get a cup of the richest hot chocolate you've ever had to warm your walk to the Observatory.

Pinocchio's Pizza, AKA "Noch's": A slice of Sicilian pizza is Harvard's unofficial brain food.

MAP OF HARVARD SQUARE



1. Memorial Church
2. Weld Hall
3. Old Burying Ground
historic cemetery
4. Newell Boat House
5. Lowell House
6. Widener Library
7. Lamont Library
8. Sever Hall
(whispering wall)
9. Soldiers Field
10. Week's Footbridge
11. The Harvard-Smithsonian
Center for Astrophysics
12. The Science Center
13. Wadsworth House

RESOURCES

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, available 24/7: 1-800-273-8255

Online chat available at: suicidepreventionlifeline.org

The Lifeline provides 24/7, free and confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources for you or your loved ones, and best practices for professionals.

Know the Risk Factors

Risk factors are characteristics that make it more likely that someone will consider, attempt, or die by suicide. They can't cause or predict a suicide attempt, but they're important to be aware of.

- Mental disorders, particularly mood disorders, schizophrenia, anxiety disorders, and certain personality disorders
- Alcohol and other substance use disorders
- Hopelessness
- Impulsive and/or aggressive tendencies
- History of trauma or abuse
- Major physical illnesses
- Previous suicide attempt(s)
- Family history of suicide
- Job or financial loss
- Loss of relationship(s)
- Easy access to lethal means
- Local clusters of suicide
- Lack of social support and sense of isolation
- Stigma associated with asking for help
- Lack of healthcare, especially mental health and substance abuse treatment
- Cultural and religious beliefs, such as the belief that suicide is a noble resolution of a personal dilemma
- Exposure to others who have died by suicide (in real life or via the media and Internet)

Know the Warning Signs

Some warning signs may help you determine if a loved one is at risk for suicide, especially if the behavior is new, has increased, or seems related to a painful event, loss, or change. If you or someone you know exhibits any of these, seek help by calling the Lifeline.

- Talking about wanting to die or to kill themselves
- Looking for a way to kill themselves, like searching online or buying a gun
- Talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
- Talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- Talking about being a burden to others
- Increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- Acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Withdrawing or isolating themselves
- Showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- Extreme mood swings

Source: National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:
<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/how-we-can-all-prevent-suicide/>

Psychology Today's "Find a Therapist" tool: psychologytoday.com/us/therapists

Psychology Today's "Find a Psychiatrist" tool: psychologytoday.com/us/psychiatrists