**Note to readers:**

Dear Reader,

I’ve always been intrigued by cult stories, from real-life cases like Heaven’s Gate and NXIVM to fictional stories like Ashley Winstead’s *The Last Housewife* and Emma Cline’s *The Girls*. These stories offer a fascinating glimpse into other realities and the dangers lurking beneath the surface. Many focus on the allure of cults—what draws people in, what makes them stay, could *you* be drawn into a cult if you found yourself in similar circumstances?

In *The Ascent*, I wanted to pose a different question: what happens after someone leaves a cult? It’s easy to think of “getting out” as the goal: when the protagonist escapes, that’s the happy ending. But, often, the transition into mainstream society is not easy, especially for children born into the group who are not “reconnecting” with the outside world but connecting with it for the first time. For these former members, leaving is often only the beginning of the story.

That idea grew into the character of Lee Burton. Lee grew up in a doomsday cult and was thrust into the outside world at twelve years old when the rest of the group disappeared. Twenty years later, she’s haunted by her past at Jacob’s Hill, even though the actual world she inhabits now—a well-to-do neighborhood in Philadelphia—could not be more different from the wooded compound where she spent her early years. Lee has never felt comfortable in the outside world or fully processed the loss of her family, and she’s forced to face that head-on when she becomes a mother herself. Lee’s story is very much about life after a cult and what it means to be a survivor, and I am so excited to share it with you.

Thank you for choosing to read *The Ascent*—I hope you enjoy it!

Yours,

Allison

**Questions:**

1. Which character in *The Ascent* did you like the most, and why? Who did you like the least?
2. How would you describe Lee and Theo’s relationship? Did you find Lee’s anxieties or Theo’s frustration more relatable? Is this a dynamic you have seen in new parents before?
3. Theo claims Lee is suffering from postpartum depression, but Lee disagrees with this assessment. Do you think this label accurately captures Lee’s experience? Why or why not?
4. At the beginning of the book, Lee is part of a mommy and me group for new mothers. Have you belonged to a similar group? What was your experience like?
5. Cults have always drawn a lot of public interest and speculation, from NXIVM to Rajneeshpuram to Heaven’s Gate and Jonestown. What do you think separates a cult from a close-knit community, and is there a bright line to be drawn? How do you think this was reflected in the book?
6. Many cults—even those that take very dark turns—draw in members by offering an appealing vision of the world: The Peoples Temple advocated for equality and racial integration, NXIVM encouraged community and self-improvement, and doomsday cults like Jacob’s Hill offer the promise of independence and self-sufficiency. Do you find any aspects of a self-sustaining community like Jacob’s Hill attractive? Why or why not?
7. Much of *The Ascent* is focused on Lee’s life after she was left by The Fifteen. What do you think life after a cult looks like? In what way does Lee’s past as a member of Jacob’s Hill continue to shape her present?
8. Lee did not choose to join Jacob’s Hill but was instead born into it. How do you think this affected Lee’s experience, if at all?
9. What role does the documentary play throughout the book, and how does Lee’s relationship to it change as the story progresses? Do you think our interest in these types of documentaries is helpful, harmless, or harmful? How accurately do you think they reflect the lived experiences of the members of the groups they examine?
10. Describe Lee’s relationship with Mona at Jacob’s Hill and her relationship with Mona when she appears in Philadelphia. In what ways is the relationship between Lee and Mona a typical sister relationship? In what ways is it different?
11. How would you describe Lee’s relationships with her mother and her aunt? How do these relationships shape Lee’s own views on motherhood?
12. What do you think is the significance of the different section names in the book? How do they connect to the story?
13. Which scene in the book stuck with you the most?
14. Discuss the ending of the book. What did you believe Mona’s motives were when she first appeared, and how did that change over the course of the book? What did you believe happened to The Fifteen and were you surprised?
15. Did the ending change your views about Lee’s beliefs and motivation throughout the book? Why or why not?

**Include recipes (from Jacob’s Hill)?**

* Bread recipe - https://www.101cookbooks.com/easy-little-bread-recipe
* Rabbit stew - https://www.simplyrecipes.com/recipes/rabbit\_stew\_with\_mushrooms/