

*This reading group guide for **Poetry Will Save Your Life** includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

Introduction

For Jill Bialosky, certain poems stand out like signposts at pivotal moments in her formative years: the death of her father; first love; leaving home; a sister's suicide; the birth of a child. Drawing from fifty-one remarkable poems by masters ranging from Robert Frost to Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop to Gwendolyn Brooks, Shakespeare to Adrienne Rich, this engaging and original memoir celebrates poetry as a means of conveying personal experience and as a source of comfort and intimacy.

Topics and Questions for Discussion

1. Bialosky has the uncanny ability to remember poems tied to specific memories as far back as ten years old. What is the first poem, nursery rhyme, or song that you can remember from childhood? Is there any memory you associate with it?
2. Bialosky is profoundly moved by Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" when it is read aloud. Pick one poem from the book, read it first to yourself and then read it aloud to a few other people. How does this exercise change your understanding of the poem? What is something new you learned about the poem by saying the words aloud?
3. Did you know that the famous lyric "Twinkle, twinkle, little star" originated in a poem? Can you think of other examples of writing that are poetic but not necessarily considered poems? How does this change your view of what poetry is or can be?
4. In "Selfhood," Bialosky describes growing up as part of the "latchkey" generation—a term coined because kids had less parental supervision typically when they returned home after school hours. Through Robert Louis Stevenson's two poems, "The Swing" and "My

Shadow,” she recognizes her own independence as a separate being from her tight-knit family of sisters. Why does Bialosky feel frightened and exhilarated by her freedom? How do these two poems exemplify this conflict? How do individual freedoms and independence differ?

5. In the chapter “Ancestor,” the question is raised: “Aren’t poems the same as prayers?” (pg.34). Bialosky describes reciting Psalm 23: “The Lord is My Shepard,” at her grandmother’s funeral and argues that they are. Do you agree? In what ways are poems and prayers created and used that make them similar or different? Why does Bialosky find solace in “Psalm 23?”
6. In the chapter “Prayer” Bialosky contends, “A poem links us to a universe at once intimate and communal.” (pg.46) How do the two poems in the chapter “Prayer” express or speak to this notion? What are the emotions that each poem evokes when you read it? Are you able to connect these two poems to your own meaning of prayer?
7. The poet Wallace Stevens is quoted in the chapter “Imagination,” saying “unreal things have a reality of their own, in poetry as elsewhere” (pg. 49). How do you interpret this in regard to Stevens’s poem, “The Snow Man?” What is something unreal in your own life that has its own reality?
8. Bialosky posits that “stories are born from desires we are too afraid to act out in real life” (pg. 51). Pick a favorite movie, book, poem, or song and write down a short summary of its story. In what ways does the story capture your fears?
9. Bialosky’s memoir takes an unconventional, non-linear style. As you read fragmented scenes from her life, are the poems that follow enhanced by her memories? Are there specific poems that remind you of a memory from your own life, and if so, which poem and why?

10. In the preface Bialosky writes, “This memoir is also a form of mythmaking, for experiences are heightened, altered, and shaped by the form in which they are told.” (pg. xv) What do you make of this statement? What did you think were Bialosky’s most memorable scenes in *Poetry Will Save Your Life*, and why?
11. Think of a formative experience in your own life and compose a poem drawing from that inspiration. Use the structure or cadences of one of the poems in the book if you need a guide.
12. How does Bialosky’s Jewish heritage contribute to her sense of identity, but also to a connotation of confinement? In what ways can knowing history be both freeing and restricting? What are the poems in the book that define this experience?
13. How does learning that Emily Dickinson lived largely isolated from the outside world of Amherst, Massachusetts, affect how you read her three poems in the chapter “Faith”? Does knowing the context of the poet’s life give the poetry more meaning?
14. The poet John Keats is quoted as saying “Even a Proverb is no proverb to you till your Life has illustrated it” (pg. 104). Interpret Keats’s meaning and discuss how it relates to the themes of *Poetry Will Save Your Life*.
15. In *Poetry Will Save Your Life* Bialosky tackles difficult life circumstances through poems such as depression (“Poppies in October,” pg. 85), suicide (“Tulips,” pg. 165), and the death of a child (“On My First Son” pg. 179). She writes, “Perhaps we turn to poetry because it can fathom and hold the inexplicable, the gasp between words, the emotional hues impossible to capture in everyday speech or conversation” (pg. 180). Do you think this is achieved in the poems she showcases? Do you have an emotional response to the poems, and if so how do they that allow you to see differently?

16. Of the poem, “My Mother’s Feet” (pg. 117-118) Bialosky explains how “anything—even a pair of feet—can be subject matter for poetry and allow for revelation.” Write a poem about a simple object and imbue it with what makes it memorable to your own experience.
17. Why do you think Bialosky titled her memoir *Poetry Will Save Your Life*? Do you think poetry has the power to change lives?