

**STUDENT CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT
DISCUSSION GUIDE TO**

**SOMEWHERE
ELSE** A NOVEL
BY JAN GUENTHER BRAUN

NAME OF PASSENGER

FROM

FLIGHT CLASS DATE TIME

GATE BOARDING TIME SEAT SMOKE

PCS WT UNCKD BAGGAGE ID NUMBER

CPN DOCUMENT NUMBER

SCMCANADA.ORG/SOMEWHEREELSE

STUDENT CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT DISCUSSION GUIDE TO SOMEWHERE ELSE

"Silence follows silence, our house was built with bricks of silence. Naturally, I moved away to build my own brick house: sturdy and strong, haunted by my own ghosts, occupied by its own unspoken words."

-Jan Guenther Braun (17)

This discussion guide to *Somewhere Else* by Jan Guenther Braun (2008) is published by the Student Christian Movement of Canada (SCM) for nonprofit use and study.

This resource is free to copy, download and distribute, courtesy of SCM's Queer & Christian Without Contradiction campaign and the Liberty Hill Foundation.

SCM is a student/youth-led ecumenical solidarity movement passionate about social justice, spirituality and community. Founded in 1921, the SCM engages the prophetic teachings of the revolutionary Jesus of Nazareth, and is made up of students and youth active in liberating theology. We organize through autonomous local units across the country, general gatherings and programmes, and our global network, the World Student Christian Federation.

Excerpts from *Somewhere Else* used with permission from Arbeiter Ring Publishing (www.arbeiterring.com). *Somewhere Else* cover adapted from design by Relish Design Studios.

scmcanada.org/somewhereelse

**STUDENT CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT
DISCUSSION GUIDE TO
SOMEWHERE ELSE
CONTENTS**

How to Use this Guide	2
Preface	3
Author's Introduction	5
Session 1: If I Speak...	10
The Bride of Christ	11
Genesis 19:1-19; Judges 19:1-30; Leviticus 18:22; Leviticus 20:13; 1 Corinthians 6:9; Romans 1:18-29 / Fear and Trembling	13
Trust Me, I'm a Professional	15
My Goddess: Abundance, Desire, Love, Fertility, and Spring	16
This is My Story (And I'm Sticking To It)	18
A Brief History of Willow Island	20
Louise and Thom	23
Meet Me in My Office Tuesday, 9:00 AM Sharp (Three Years Later) / A Calculated Chance Meeting	24
Over For Coffee	25
Feminine Hygiene Products / A Little Way Down the Road	27
Elevator Songs	29
Bank Notices and Death Cards / Poker Faces / In the Air Now	31
Cold Concrete and Resolute Defiance (A Reunion)	33
Directions Home	35
Manifestation of a Four-Hundred-Year-Old Ghost	36
Cold Rocks and Loud Tears	37
Negotiating with the Dead	38
Pancakes	40
Powerful Sensation of Life Under the Tongue — Nicole Brossard, Museum of Bone and Water	41
Last Session: Unspoken Words...	43

How to Use this Guide

Somewhere Else offers an opportunity to engage in dialogue and reflection around issues often silenced in the Church and in our families. We hope this Discussion Guide can help in individual and group study of Jan Guenther Braun's novel, providing a springboard for exploring important ideas and themes.

There's no template for *how* to use this resource, but here are a few tips:

- It will help to bring a copy of the novel, this discussion guide, and a Bible to each session for reference. **While supplies last, SCM is offering free copies of the book.**
- An **ideal group size** for discussion is 4-10 people, meeting over an agreed-upon time frame (3-6 months) on a regular basis. In our experience, 1.5 - 2 hours is a good time to meet, weekly or biweekly.
- Decide how you are going to **divide up the chapters**, based upon desired time-frame and frequency of your gatherings. Some chapters are shorter and can be read and discussed together in one gathering; others will take a full session each.
- We recommend holding an informal **get-together** (ideally with snacks to share or a potluck) as the first session of a book study group. Before you launch into the novel, invite the group to introduce themselves, to share why they came, and to discuss the questions in the opening discussion, *If I Speak...* (p 9).
- **Start each book study session** with a short go-around to check in personally. How are people doing? What has struck participants in their readings and experience since the previous gathering?
- **Each session can close** with a final go-around to reflect on any learnings, insights or hopes from the gathering. If appropriate, you could end with a time of group prayers for personal/community concerns and thanksgiving, or silent reflection.
- **Have fun, and trust the group** to take the conversation where it needs to go. If it feels off track, you might wish to appoint a rotating facilitator to guide discussion back to the Discussion Guide questions. Use whatever in here you find helpful.

Preface

Sheryl Johnson

Books are wonderful tools for individual exploration, making connections with close friends, or disseminating messages widely and creating bonds across great distances. SCM hopes that the novel *Somewhere Else*, with this study guide, will assist with each of these aspects, as individuals just beginning to explore sexuality and faith might read this text alone - to learn they are not alone in their experience, that groups might meet together and use this book and guide to build community and foster discussion, and that the wide dissemination of these resources across the country and beyond might push our communities and our churches to engage authentically and prayerfully in open and honest engagement with queer issues and experiences.

Creating this book study resource has been a privilege and a microcosm of its potential. Geoffrey Dice (Saskatoon), Allison Piercey (Waterloo), and myself (Toronto) met weekly by conference call to explore challenging, thoughtful, and humorous themes and aspects of *Somewhere Else* and the many intersections with our own

lives and experiences. Our study, combined with check-ins and prayer, formed an atypical study group employing technology to deepen our connections with each other and to pause from our lives to be reminded of the call of SCM: to reach out to young people, like Jess, trying to hold to the goodness of faith even when churches and their members condemn and exclude.

As a National Co-Representative of the SCM, I am thrilled to offer this study resource to campuses and individuals across Canada. Many thanks to Allison, Geoff, and Bre Woligroski (editor) and also to Jan Braun, author, and Rick at Arbeiter Ring Publishing for their invaluable support of this initiative.

Sheryl Johnson,

National Co-Representative to the SCM Board

p.s. SCM offers further resources on our website:

- Anti-homophobia Resources (Bible studies, activity guides, theological reflection, buttons): **www.queerandchristian.org**
- Podcasting & Audio interviews with author Jan Guenther Braun: **scmcanada.org/radio**
- *Epistle* (SCM's occasional journal of theology, arts and theory) 2009 issue on issues of inclusion and sexual/gender diversity: **scmcanada.org/epistle**
- Online discussion forums on topics of social justice, human rights, theology, sexuality and more: **scmcanada.org/forum**

"I've always loved my family, even in the midst of my numb heart because embedded in the stitches that bind my skin, climbing the hundred-foot banks of my soul, sitting in the wooden church benches of my heart is the community of me."

- Jan Guenther Braun, 196

Author's Introduction

Jan Guenther Braun

I have a reading copy of my book, *Somewhere Else*, that is well-worn now with page markers, a cracked spine, and teeth marks on the cover where my cat chewed on it. There's a hand-written list hidden in the front cover that I read from on the night of my Winnipeg book launch, thanking all the people who have helped me through the eight-year journey of writing.

During the eight years that it took me to write this book, there have been a lot of tears shed. What started out as a way to amuse myself while waiting for a friend in a bar one night turned into some of the most important spiritual work I've done for myself.

I grew up in rural Saskatchewan in a Mennonite church with a membership of about a hundred-and-fifty. After being baptised at the age of seventeen, upon confession of faith, I graduated from high school and headed to Bible college in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where I graduated with a Bachelor of Theology. During my time at Bible

college I participated in a summer pastoral internship in Toronto.

After that experience and after discussions with professors and other mentors, I felt that becoming a minister was what I was being called to do. During that time I was also starting to wrestle with the fact that I was queer. I didn't know how the two parts of me – minister and queer person – would ever coexist. Those worries haunted me, but I continued to press on with my plans. As it became more and more obvious to me that I could not be both, I started grieving the life that I thought had been laid out in front of me.

When I finally came out to my parents, one of the first comments that my Dad made was, “Now no one will hire you to be a minister.” By a terrible coincidence, I had to preach the sermon at my home church the Sunday after I came out to my parents and my Mom was so upset by the thought of her gay daughter standing behind a pulpit preaching the word of God that she refused to go to church that morning.

For three to four years, there wasn't a day that went by when I didn't think about and feel the grief and agony of the knowledge that I could not be both queer and Mennonite – let alone a Mennonite pastor. I felt like my entire self was being taken away from me. I felt like I was being asked to choose between myself and myself, which would end up cancelling everything out – leaving me with nothing, as nothing. I had always been a writer; that passion took me by the hand and guided me through some incredibly tough emotional waters.

I wrote this book for myself. But as the list of thank yous in the cover of my book suggests, I didn't write it in a vacuum. Having *Somewhere Else* included in the Student Christian Movement curriculum dealing with issues of inclusion in the church is a dream come true. I am pleased and honoured to be participating in this way.

The temptation for some folks is to label my book as autobiographical – the story of a young prairie Mennonite girl who runs away from home when she realizes she's queer. And while many of the elements of the story are true to life, what is more important to me is that the story be considered emotionally true.

So many people have asked me over the years why I don't just walk away from the church. I've certainly asked myself the same question, and I have to admit that the answers don't necessarily come easily. I'm still around, so to speak, and I still care about my Mennonite community.

The Bible is full of unlikely heroes, which is a part of the reason I like the narratives so much. I think that Jess is the unlikely hero of this narrative. With a new life started and a sense of family established things start to unravel for Jess when she finds love. After spending most of the story being closed off to her emotions, ironically, Jess is the one who goes home to tackle the big silent emotions of her family.

Along the way, Jess is riddled with anxiety of the variety that can not necessarily be spoken but is usually absorbed with the inhalation of a cigarette or, conversely, by throwing it all up. I think that all too often, when people find themselves on an emotional island, they turn to whatever makes them feel like they are coping, and Jess is no exception. I think it's helpful, when discussing this book, to consider all the ways in which Jess attempts to cope with walking away from everything. For all her faults, Freya too is trying to walk away, as are Shea and Halfsteinn for that matter. I would be interested to see if there are statistics regarding the rate of addiction for the LGBTQ community in relationship to being kicked out of their church or religious community.

One of my coping mechanisms has been to bury myself in the art and writing of others. Jess finds the poetry of Martha Wiens while snooping through her father's things and it opens a window inside of her. For the rest of the book Jess is on a mission to discover more about the poet, holding her up as a sort of goddess in her mind. She asks the question of what Martha would do in certain situations and I think that by the end of the book, Jess has become Martha to herself.

One of the greatest challenges that I faced while writing this book was to love and respect each and every one of the characters. I would be lying if I said that I didn't like some more than others, though. I couldn't possibly portray Jess' parents as simply unloving, conservative, narrow-minded people. It's too easy to be that flippant,

and that doesn't take into consideration the miles of context and consideration in which they, along with every human, can be placed. I know that my parents love me very much but have genuinely struggled with what God is calling/commanding them to believe. That doesn't mean that I haven't been angry and frustrated with them but I believe that it's helped me continue to love them and to want to continue having a relationship with them.

I'm not sure if my parents have read my book. My mom said at one point that she just feels too vulnerable and I wonder if it would be too difficult for my parents to separate the fiction from real life. I don't think that parents generally hold their newborn in their arms and think, 'One day she's going to grow up to write a book that makes me feel really uncomfortable.' Part of me hopes that they read it so that they will see how much I love and respect my family and my community. If anyone reads this book and gets the impression that I hate Mennonites or Christians, I would say that they've projected something onto the book that just isn't there. One of the most important things that an artist can do for their community is to have one foot out the door with an eye on everything that's going on. This means a swift, critical, sometimes angry, response, but that shouldn't necessarily be considered a bad thing or an act of treason.

I hope too, that this book might be considered through the lens of critical feminist thinking. Although there aren't many overt moments of feminism – with the biggest definitely being at the place when Jess considers Judges 19:22-26 through feminist eyes – I definitely place myself firmly and happily within the great big world of feminism, which absolutely affects the narrative.

I hope that this book adds to the discussion. If you flip to the back of the book to where the acknowledgments are, you'll find a paragraph near the bottom where I confess to be only a voice in the choir. There are so many opinions, so many points of view and by talking to each other we discover so much - which is such an obvious cliché thing to say, I know. When I lived in Waterloo I went to a church that, on the outside, seemed to be just a bunch of grey-haired, regular, run of the mill kind of people. We met in a very plain church, and we had ordinary church services with

nothing flashy or show-like. There were none of the famed Waterloo Mennonite thinkers attending our congregation, and no people really in a position of power or prestige, in terms of the Mennonite world. What we did have, and what kept me coming back every Sunday with enthusiasm and joy, was the most wonderful dialogue each and every time we sat down for our adult Sunday school. I was amazed at the ability of the people who attended regularly to sit in disagreement with each other. It was respectful, spirited, loving, fierce, and all over the map and somehow people didn't appear to be that threatened by the vastly different beliefs and opinions of others. I don't know what the secret to their success was, but I can't help but wonder if it started with simply being in community with everyone – committing to a loving, long-term relationship with the people they went to church with, and committing to being family, I suppose. How do we do that when it's so easy to shop for a different church, or sit at home watching church on TV? How do we do that when some people have been so damaged and oppressed during their time at church that it would cause egregious harm for them to step foot into church again? During a recent interview for an SCM podcast (www.scmcanada.org/radio), David Ball, National Coordinator, asked me questions about my spiritual practice to which I really had no answer.

Maybe it's because I don't consider myself to be overly spiritual but would identify as religious. I'm not sure what that means exactly, and perhaps in the future I will have a more fleshed out explanation; but my point, for now, is that I value community.

I conceive of my faith communally. When I hear things about spirituality, I hear alarm bells because, for me, it negates the collective ritual. For better or worse, church is a family, and for better or worse, community is a place spirits, minds, hearts, bodies, mouths, intentions, etc., collide and mix. I appreciate very much the desire on the part of SCM for dialogue no matter what the outcome. I appreciate that SCM is an organization that is always in the process of organizing itself for (hopefully) the benefit of a community. I hope that my book can be a voice in the choir and again, I appreciate the invitation very much to be invited to participate in this conversation.

Many blessings to all,
Jan

"If I speak, my pain is not assuaged, and if I forbear, how much of it leaves me?" (Job 16:6)

Session 1: If I Speak...

What does the Bible verse on the dedication page of *Somewhere Else* (above) suggest to you? What sense do you have of what this story will be about? What experiences and assumptions are you bringing to this book and this discussion? What do you hope to learn, or reflect upon?

Perhaps revisit this passage again throughout your reading to see how your understanding of its meaning shifts.

Throughout your study, consider tracking Jess' travels on a map to learn a little about the places that are mentioned. Some of these locations are fictional while others are real. Explore why the author may have chosen to place certain events in fictional locations.

"For better or worse, a church is a family. I didn't choose my parents - two members of the Mennonite church - I didn't choose the other members of the church, I didn't choose my Sunday school teachers or their lessons, I didn't choose what Martha Wiebe brought for the after-service potluck every month, and I didn't choose the God... Church - the building, the concept, the people, the beliefs - was where I understood myself" (10).

The Bride of Christ

Consider Jess' description of her church experiences. What is your personal connection to church, if any? What is the overall memory you have of your childhood experiences of church, if you were involved when you were young? (pp. 10-11)

Jess learns about the exclusion of homosexuals from her church through a church bulletin announcement (pp. 11-12). If you are able, consider when you first encountered the notion of a contradiction between Christian faith and homosexuality. Also, when did you first encounter the notion that homosexuality and faith might not have to be mutually exclusive?

Consider the text of Judges 19:22-26 (p. 12):

"While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, a perverse lot, surrounded the house, and started pounding on the door. They said to the old man, the master of the house, 'Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we may have intercourse with him.' And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, 'No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing. Here are my virgin daughter and his concubine; let me bring them out now. So the man seized the concubine,

and put her out to them. They wantonly raped her, and abused her all through the night until the morning. And as the dawn began to break, they let her go. As morning appeared, the woman came and fell down at the door of the man's house where her master was, until it was light" (Judges 19:22-26 NRSV).

How does this story relate to Jess' experience thus far? What symbolic role do women serve in this story? Is this a Bible story that you were familiar with prior to reading this book? Is this the sort of Bible story that was explored in your church experience?

Why are Jess' parents so angry with her (pp. 14-16)? Why won't they let her speak about what is going on for her?

Jess seems to consider suicide on page 17. Statistics tell us that suicide rates for queer youth are particularly high. How can we create a society where this wouldn't happen? What support structures would need to be added and what things would need to change in our society?

“Therefore God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up nature intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error” (Romans 1:26-27 NRSV).

Genesis 19:1-19; Judges 19:1-30; Leviticus 18:22; Leviticus 20:13; 1 Corinthians 6:9; Romans 1:18- 29 / Fear and Trembling

What do the Bible passages used as the title of this chapter describe? Have you encountered these texts, either separately or grouped together, before reading them here? How have they been used?

You may find it helpful to consult SCM’s resource *Stop Homophobia in the Churches* for interpretation of these and other scriptures (queerandchristian.org/stophomophobia).

Why doesn’t Jess want her father to take the job as President of the College? What “choice” is she suggesting that he will have to make every day? (p. 20)

Jess describes some of her childhood experiences with appropriate gender roles. Why didn’t she like to wear dresses? What was her mother’s reaction to this? What early memories do you have relating to gender and what role did your parents play in this? (p. 22)

What is surprising about Martha Wiens' poetry? How do you imagine that Jess' father encountered it, and why did he choose to keep it? (p. 25):

*"How can I thank you God
When it is my hands, absolutely thankful
that finally reach out to touch her skin
which releases my voice, sweating out of my body
in a purging ecstasy enveloping my body in love?
You make me choose between my lover
And You, my distant threat
(so much more distant when I see the righteous anger glowing in their eyes)
...
just some more of the same nails driven
through my palms
Crucifying me
A death I will die forever
I assure You
My love for Her will not relent" (26)*

Does this suggest a tension between his academic and personal/religious life, where he can tolerate or at least consider homosexuality in one but not the other? Have you encountered individuals who struggle with this?

Wiens seems to be one of the first connections that Jess has with a queer-identified person. Do you have any particular memories of the first queer person (or person you thought might be queer) you encountered?

“John was the only one in my family that I felt had a set of ears. He was the only one that I could truly be myself around. More importantly, he was the only one I felt comfortable around while in a state of disagreement” (33).

Trust Me, I’m a Professional

Why do Jess’ parents decide to send her away to private school in Ontario? How do you think they are feeling at this point? (p. 30)

It is clear that Jess’ brother, John, is not the picture of obedience either, yet he is able to hide behaviours (i.e. marijuana smoking) that their parents do not approve of. This allows him to stay in Saskatchewan and go home weekly to visit. Why can’t this work for Jess? (pp. 32-33)

What is John’s reaction when Jess states that she is a homosexual? How do you think Jess perceives this reaction? How would you perceive this? (p. 33)

How are queer or “deviant” identities tied to urban spaces? Is this a reality or a stereotype? Do you think that this impacts Jess’ desire to leave the town where she grew up? How do you feel about her abrupt departure? (p. 34)

“She seemed genuinely outraged on my behalf. She seemed ready for a fight. I felt that after knowing me for only thirty minutes she understood me in a way that I’d never been understood” (41).

My Goddess: Abundance, Desire, Love, Fertility, and Spring

Why does Freya approach Jess on the train? How does she know she is a “safe” person to discuss sexuality with? How do you personally tell if someone is safe to discuss particular matters with? (p. 39)

Freya comments that “it’s so ridiculous how people can let their religion get in the way of loving their kids” (p. 41). Is this ridiculous? What is the role of one’s religion in parenting? Should religion define parameters for parenting?

Freya associates “academia” with “liberal” or “open-minded” dispositions. How true is this in your experience? What is the relationship between one’s university experience and his/her/zis views on particular issues? (p. 42)

What does Jess mean when she says that she didn’t realize that she could walk away from her Mennonite identity, that it was like a “skin?” (p. 42) Are there aspects of your identity, religious or otherwise, that you feel are like a skin to you?

Why does Jess agree to Freya’s offer of “spending a little time in her bed?” (p. 43) so quickly after they have met. Is it purely sexual or physical, or something more

which drives her to seek a sexual relationship so quickly after meeting Freya?

What does Wiens' poem on page 46 suggest? What might it be foreshadowing with relation to Jess?

"... They burned your books

Your mythology began rising from the ashes

I was like the bison herds chasing fresh sprouts of grass" (46).

“On the sign was the insignia of the national church body - the same insignia my church in Saskatchewan had on its sign. [...] I started banging on the door with my fist, still crying, and with another stone started carving into the wood.

‘Dear God,’ I carved, the wood giving way easily to my makeshift pen” (59).

This is My Story (And I’m Sticking To It)

Jess’ initiation into Freya’s house is fast and furious – she comes in drunk, has sex, and soon becomes vegan and starts going to protests (p. 48). Why does Jess enter this life so quickly?

It is interesting how the “sex” part of sexual orientation can sometimes be left out in our conversations and theorizing. Why is this? How does this book contribute to this discussion?

Jess compares Mennonite ideals to those of the commune. Can you note similarities in the Mennonite or communal lifestyle in your personal experience? Is God an important part of radical/alternative lifestyle? Can Christianity be lived out in radical ways? If so, what are some examples? What does Jess mean on page 51 when she speaks of neo-hippy anarchists?

What is the association between queer identity and activism? How is this expressed in Freya? In Jess? (p. 52)

Jess creates a pseudo-mathematical equation on page 53 which explains why she

had to leave her family. If you are comfortable, try to formulate aspects of your identity or experience like Jess does in this equation.

Jess seems only peripherally related to life in the commune, with Freya acting as her window in. Why does Freya keep her on the margins? Is this Jess' own choice? What impact does Jess' Mennonite upbringing have on this? What are some experiences of periphery that you might identify with?

How might you treat Jess if you knew her at this point in her life? How would you relate to her? What words or presence might you offer?

Why does Jess want to meet Freya's mother? What is the role of religion in all of this? (p. 54) Why doesn't Freya want Jess to meet her? In describing her situation to Freya's mother, Jess says she isn't running away (p. 55). Is this true, or is Jess being an escapist?

Why are Sunday afternoons so hard for Jess? What is "Sunday PMS?" Have you ever experienced anything like this? (p. 58)

Why does Jess throw rocks at the Mennonite church in Winnipeg and carve into it? She begins "dear God..." What would have followed? What would you put to follow this? Are there any churches that you would like to send specific messages to? What would these messages be? (p. 59)

How do you feel about Jess' mother's reaction when she calls home? Why does she react this way? How would you react if you were Jess' mother? (pp. 60-61).

Page 61 explains that "running" is part of the Mennonite history. Fringe lifestyles and persecution are also considered parts of Mennonite history. How do these relate to Jess' story?

“I walked closer to the water. My eyes focused but couldn’t see anything save a dark glassy mass stretching out in front of me. It was so beautiful, straining to be nothing but itself - a dark, vast body of water [...]. I crouched down and submerged myself fully” (65).

A Brief History of Willow Island

Why is Freya’s cultural heritage important? Why is there such a disconnect with her parents? Why does she feel so connected to her grandparents and cousins? What is your experience of extended family and culture? (pp.63-64)

What is the significance of Jess’ baptism (p. 65)?

What is your sense of Amma and Afi’s response towards homosexuality? What does their silence mean? Are they unwilling or unable to acknowledge or understand homosexuality, while at the same time being loving towards their own queer granddaughter? (p. 72)

Jess has very strong ties between her emotional wellbeing and her physical wellbeing as expressed through her stomach (p. 75). Reflect on this connection as it is articulated throughout the book.

Freya says that she does “everything that [her mother] would want – [she’s] a radical leftist queer feminist” (p. 77), but still does not feel like she has a close relationship with her mother. Reflect on reasons why this may be so.

Jess feels rejected by her own family, but has adopted Amma and Afi into her own “family experience.” Still, she feels that she can’t connect with Freya’s cousins. Jess also comments that “there’s something about finding family when you’re such a sparsely populated people that seems urgent . . . Mennonites slip into exclusionary politics with frightening ease.” (p. 78) Earlier, Jess names Freya as her “makeshift replacement” for her family. (p. 54) Finding and creating family are common experiences for many queer people. What is the role of “family” in queer experiences and identity? How can it be oppressive, problematic, supportive, or a place of liberation?

Jess also comments on “ethnic common experiences” (pacifism, commonalities of taste experience with food, etc.) that she wasn’t aware of unless placed outside of her own “ethnic bubble.” Have you experienced this aspect of family? (p. 78)

Jess talks about how she got her name. (pp. 81-82) In this story, she says that she named herself “Jess” as part of her self-discovery as a feminist. What role can naming oneself play in our identities? Have you ever chosen a name other than that which you were given? How did this reflect on your identity?

On p. 82, Jess jokes that the Unitarian Universalist Church is the church that people leaving the United Church of Canada go to when they “find even the United Church too much church to handle.” Later, on p. 83, she talks about the various “brands” of Mennonites, and says that those who leave the Mennonite church go to the United Church. She also lists reasons that the Mennonite church is liberal or progressive, but only on specific issues. If you belong to a specific denomination, what would it take to make you leave that denomination for another?

Jess says she realizes three things about the Bible, which she labels as “a bunch of patriarchal bullshit . . . there is no longer any inherent reason for men to have the buttons of their shirt on one side and women on the other. Gender is largely a construct that we wear. The second is that the Bible was written by real live human men. Men, not women. The third is that God as father above us in heaven does not exist but somehow I still catch myself believing.” Unpack and discuss these three

criticisms. (p. 82)

On page 85, Jess passively refuses sex, and Freya responds by adopting an attitude of control, telling Jess she needs a haircut and once again bringing up university applications. How does this reflect on Freya and her part in their relationship? On pages 86-87, Jess develops a friendship with Halfsteinn, which she keeps separate and secret from Freya. What is she seeking in this “secret” relationship? Halfsteinn then says that Jess is “a kept woman. She tells you what to do and expects you to fall in line.” Jess responds with “I think you’re jealous.” Why does Jess respond in this way?

On page 88, Freya applies to the University of Winnipeg on Jess’ behalf. Freya often acts in a manipulative fashion towards Jess; how does Jess react towards this manipulation, in general and now specifically? Afterwards, Jess applies and gets accepted into the University of Waterloo. Freya responds with “I am an autonomous being and I don’t do things for you and you don’t do things for me.” (p. 89) What are signs of both healthy and unhealthy relationships? How do you feel mutuality should be played out in a relationship? How does Jess choose to deal with the mutuality or lack thereof in their relationship?

Jess feels that she has very little or nothing at all, but then makes a mental list (p. 91) reflecting on those things she does have. How does this empower Jess?

“When [Jesus’ parents] did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers” (Luke 2:45-47 NRSV).

Louise and Thom

Freya “outs” Thom and Thom is not even out yet to himself (p. 96). This has a devastating effect both on Thom and on Thom’s relationship to Halfsteinn. How does one’s “out” status with others and with ourselves affect our relationships, both internally and externally?

What is the significance of Jess regaining her hearing? (p. 98)

Louise jokes that Jess should go into Women’s Studies as there are “way more ladies” (p. 101) in it, rather than in the English department. In your experience, do queer people gravitate towards certain occupations, schools, or other life goals? Why do you feel this is?

Jess “hold[s] court” (p. 102) with her father’s colleagues at age 14, but is silenced by her father because of her gender. Compare and contrast this with the story of Jesus teaching in the Temple at age 12 (Luke 2:41-50).

“This is no longer about your undergrad thesis. This is about your life. This is about working through some psychological barrier that you need to get past” (110).

Meet Me in My Office Tuesday, 9:00 AM Sharp (Three Years Later) / A Calculated Chance Meeting

What is it that compels Jess to write her undergrad thesis on Martha Wiens (p. 107), and what holds her back from doing the necessary work to complete this thesis?

Jess inadvertently “outs” herself as having a “churchy type” background (p. 110). Is this a common experience for queer Christians? What does it mean that “churchy types” share a common language? How does this reflect on inclusivity, if “churchy types” have forms of language which are inaccessible to some?

“Is this a date?’
‘Well,’ she said [...], ‘I think that when I tell this story, I’ll say it was a date.’
‘And who am I to choose your words,’ I said, shrugging.
‘Where are you from?’ Shea said quietly.
‘Oh, you know, somewhere else - not here, nowhere. Does it matter?’” (121).

Over For Coffee

On page 117, Jess prepares coffee in a very systematic fashion similar to Halfsteinn’s instructions on how to roll the perfect cigarette. Is this a response to his request that she “pick one small, seemingly insignificant thing in [her] life that [she] will care about passionately as a craft” (p. 74)? What function does this craft serve for Jess?

Jess retreats into “Literary Criticism 100A” (p. 121) when directly confronted by Shea with regards to asking person questions and making an emotional connection. Why has she developed these defence mechanisms? How does this relate to her past relationship with Freya, and her multiple one-time sexual encounters since coming to Waterloo?

Jess jokes that “Nobody told me [rejection of Mennonite identity] was an option” (p. 123). Have you ever felt that giving up a part of your identity - even one that others may not understand or see as integral - was impossible to give up, even when it was oppressive?

What do you think Jess means when she says that she “hasn’t cried since I left my parents . . . No, that’s not true. But my crying is different now” (p. 126). Why does she reference her dream of violence in this intimate situation?

“Maybe love is something we fall asleep to. Like the CD you put on before bed. As you cross the line between consciousness and unconsciousness, it plays on as the soundtrack to your dreams. [...] Maybe love is like something we’re offered every month - like a fresh start” (138).

Feminine Hygiene Products / A Little Way Down the Road

How did you feel while reading the passage about Jess’ experience of sexual harassment in the bar (pp. 129-130), and her subsequent violent response?

Jess seems hesitant to name or even completely acknowledge her emerging relationship with Shea, even though she feels strongly about it. Why might this be? What is the significance of “naming” a relationship? (p. 132-133)

Jess and Shea attend a dinner party with many of members of the Mennonite community in Waterloo, and Jess’ father’s name is mentioned and evokes a strong reaction in Jess. Her “old life” in Saskatchewan and her “new life” in Waterloo are coming into contact through the interconnection of the Mennonite community. Why this might be especially difficult? Many people “segment” their lives with various communities or involvements, and this can particularly be relevant for queer-identified individuals who might be out in some groups but not in others. Do you experience “segmentation” in your life? What are the benefits and challenges of such an arrangement? (p. 133)

Through this conversation, Jess learns that her father is not doing well and has become an alcoholic. How does this news affect Jess? Does the lack of knowledge about Jess' relationship to Dr. Klassen contribute to her announcing her relationship with Shea? Why does Jess name this relationship? (p. 134)

Jess has received a variety of reactions to her sexuality throughout the book (with her parents, with her brother, with Freya on the train, with Amma and Afi, etc.) and now at the dinner table. What are some of the similarities and differences between these reactions? (p. 134)

Of course, in this instance of outing herself, Jess has also outed Shea. How does Shea react to being outed without having any control over/say in the matter? Why does she focus on her father's embarrassment rather than her own feelings when speaking with Jess? (p. 135)

We learn that Jess has shared very little of her background or experience with Shea. Why is this so? (p. 136) After the dinner, Shea's and Jess' family experiences are both very much at the forefront. How are their situations similar or different? (p. 137)

The chapter ends with Jess exploring the concept of "love." What is it about her relationship with Shea that seems to demonstrate love? What is your reaction to Jess' analogy about love in the final paragraph of the chapter? (p. 138)

"I held her close. Between us was the alto and soprano parts of the hymn 'Praise God from Whom all Blessings Flow,' a detailed map of guilt and longing, [...] and a belief [...] that conditional love from parents is somehow biblically justified" (152).

Elevator Songs

Jess pushes Shea to speak with her father, who has not addressed the issue that arose at the dinner party. Shea responds that Jess has no right to make such a demand as she has not even seen her own family in five years, and Jess begins to compare their situations. How relevant can "advice" be if situations can be so very different? Are there any general threads of advice about how queer-identified individuals should deal with family that you are aware of? If so, is this advice helpful in all situations? (pp. 140-141)

The issue of "naming" arises once again as Shea asks Jess to say her name. Why is this naming significant in this particular moment of their relationship? (p. 141)

How does Jess feel about having shared Mennonite heritage with Shea? (p. 143)

Shea appears to be frustrated with Jess' communication style. What is her communication style with Shea, or others more generally? (p. 146)

Consider Jess' relationship with Thom and Louise. How would you describe it? How have they been important to Jess? (p. 147)

Jess presents an interesting reflection on nakedness when she is describing her experience of taking showers. If you are comfortable, consider the idea of being unrecognizable, to some extent, in our nakedness, while at the same time intimately familiar. What is the role of clothing – does it express, shield, cover, adorn, serve a function, or anything else? (p. 148)

Jess describes the experience of water in the shower flowing over her body as “stability.” Are there material items, places, times, people, feelings, etc. that represent “stability” for you? (p. 148)

Although Jess has great difficulty stating Shea’s name aloud, we learn that in her head she refers to Shea as “the object of my Love.” What is your reaction to this? Have you ever been unable to name a person? What is the relationship between personal name and “function/role/relation to us” - for example, knowing someone as “the person who is usually on the late shift at the grocery store” but not knowing their name, as opposed to knowing the name of a person by hearing it through a mutual friend but knowing very little about them as an individual? (p. 151)

The line “our body can betray our mind’s effort to hide pain” is quite relevant to this book, and perhaps life more generally. What are some aspects of Jess’ bodily responses or physical desires/actions which in some ways differ from what she appears to think? Do you feel that your emotions/thoughts are often expressed in your bodily being? Are you able to “put on a face” and separate the two? (p. 152)

“Do you believe in God?” the man said.
‘I keep trying not to.’ I joined him in a long
drink.
‘You’re the angel sent to comfort me.’
‘Yes, I am.’
‘Are we going to land?’
‘Absolutely’” (157).

Bank Notices and Death Cards / Poker Faces / In the Air Now

*“I can feel the wonder of a newborn child
I can stand in awe while looking at a blade of grass
I can forget my past”* (154).

Reflect on the idea of “death as a black envelope in the mail.” (p. 154)

In the brief chapter, “Poker Faces,” we learn that Jess is leaving again. Where do you think that she is going? How does this “leaving” bear similarity to the times that she has left places earlier? Why does Jess leave in such an abrupt fashion? (p. 155)

Jess notes briefly that she is uncomfortable with her seat-mate on the airplane because she expects that he might ask at any moment about “a boyfriend.” Why does Jess want to avoid this conversation? What are some aspects of heteronormativity (the societal presumption of heterosexuality) of which you are aware, or have encountered? (p. 156)

On page 157 we learn that Jess is going to Saskatchewan. Why, at this time in her life,

has she chosen to go back home? What will this accomplish?

Jess and her seatmate have a somewhat theological conversation on the plane. Why does this man bring up the idea of God and angels? Have you ever had a conversation about religion with strangers? What was your experience of that conversation and how did it impact your feeling of connection with that individual or your surroundings more generally? (p. 157)

Jess lists six important relationships for which her trip to Saskatchewan will have ramifications. Which do you feel will be the most impacted? The most difficult to deal with? Why did Jess leave without telling “Love?” (pp. 157-158)

What is the significance of Jess flying back as opposed to taking the train? Why does she feel that “travelling back this quickly was unhealthy?” Have you ever felt that travelling physical distances goes too quickly? (p. 158)

“I went far away, I mean, not that far geographically, I didn’t go to the ends of the earth, but I tried as hard as possible to erase the person who came from Saskatchewan; I’ve been trying to live without a history.’

‘And why has that been unsuccessful?’

‘It has been successful. [...] Well, I guess it was successful for a time and then things changed’ (166-7).

Cold Concrete and Resolute Defiance (A Reunion)

Why does Jess decide to stop in Winnipeg before going to Saskatchewan? What purpose does seeing Freya again serve? How do you think Jess feels about Freya having a boyfriend? Have you had any experience of individuals (including perhaps yourself) dating individuals who identify as male and female at different times? If so, were there implications for friendships, identity, or activist/queer community involvements that you are aware of? (p. 160)

Going back to Winnipeg evokes many memories from when Jess had lived there previously. These memories are not only of people but also of places, weather, life experiences, work projects, etc. What aspects of memory (people, place, season, smell, etc.) generally stand out for you? Are there any places that contain strong memories for you? What do you feel when you go back there, if you do? (p. 162)

We learn here that Freya’s name for Jess was “girlfriend” and later “G.” How does Jess feel about this? How about Jess’ own name? What implication/relation might this have to Jess’ naming of Shea and her ideas about naming overall? (p. 162)

How does Halfsteinn greet Jess? What is your reaction to this gracious homecoming? Have you ever experienced unexpected welcome and compassionate understanding? (p. 164)

Halfsteinn asks Jess why she is going back to Saskatchewan now. How does she respond? Why do you think she chooses to go at this point in her life, despite the potential for it to be very painful? Why has she been unable to forget about her earlier life there? (p. 166)

Halfsteinn surprises Jess when he announces that he is afraid of water, particularly in light of his job as a fisherman. What message does he share by stating this? (p. 167)

"I took a deep breath. 'I don't know why I'm here,' I said. [...]

'I've never met someone who could sleep as much as you. Are you going to your mom and dad's to sleep some more?' She was bouncing up and down on her seat.

'I hope not,' I replied.

My feet touched the pavement and it felt like a lunar landing" (170).

Directions Home

Jess goes into minute detail about how to return home. Have you had or taken the opportunity to "return home?" If not, what would that look like? (p. 169)

Jess left Blaurock on her own, but seems to have folks like Thane and Chloe guiding her return. What is the significance of their role in Jess' journey? (p. 169)

“There is beauty in our chaotic inability to be assured of our lives after death - no one will say for sure that they’re heaven bound after they die, ‘in’ and ‘out’ we pronounce, contradicting ourselves while as we choke on the theology of our ‘just to be safe’ exclusion. I understand that you have to be defined by something or you risk being nothing at all” (175).

Manifestation of a Four-Hundred-Year-Old Ghost

Jess did not describe her town earlier in the novel, yet now, near the end of the novel, she describes it in intimate detail. Does it look like what you imagined it to look like at the beginning? (p. 171)

Jess goes from feeling like she’s home to feeling like she’s in a foreign land within the span of two paragraphs (p. 172). Home can often be a place of shifting comfort levels, sometimes instantaneously. Do you think Jess will ever feel comfortable at home again? Reflect on your own experience of this.

Jess says “You cannot speak rationally to God.” Is this true? (p. 174)

For the first time, Jess cannot vomit at a crisis (p. 175). What is the significance of this? Does this signify the end of her journey?

“The world around me is starting to wake [...]. There is a silence that I have not experienced since I moved to Ontario, and I’m pleasantly surprised to find that I’m not scared of it. After tonight, maybe I’ll never be afraid again” (176).

Cold Rocks and Loud Tears

Jess is changed by the silence she experiences by the North Saskatchewan River. Silence can be oppressive or liberating, especially in queer contexts. How has silence related to the queer context in your life? (p. 176)

Martha has chosen seclusion, but still maintains some small connection to her community, instead of running away like Jess. Even after revealing that she had a child that is now grown and with his own life, she continues to live out in the wilderness. Have you chosen to live in the wilderness? If so, in what way? Can you relate to Martha’s need to stay close to this community? (p. 178)

“Do you think he knew about you being gay before you left? He didn’t. And since when have you become so fond of simple answers to complex questions?” (189).

Negotiating with the Dead

Jess and her mother are able to confront each other and say what they really mean to say. How is this different from conversations between Jess and her father? What does it say about her relationship with her mother? (p. 180)

Jess is shocked that her family didn’t talk about her absence. She also seems surprised that her family has changed as much as it has. How would you deal with these kinds of changes and realities after such a long disappearance? How would it impact your relationship to them? (p. 183)

In Jess’ experience, “Guilt” and “home” are related. Is this understanding common for those who have been away from home for a long time? What other kinds of feelings might be attached with home after such a long absence? (p. 184)

Jess’ grandfather’s reaction to her refusal to eat meat could be indicative of his refusal to accept her “lifestyle choices.” Do you think she will ever reveal her Self to him? Do you think that is even important? How would you talk to the elders in your own family about your sexuality? (p. 186)

The real story behind Jess’ name is finally revealed. What was interesting to you about this story? Was it what you had expected? How does it explain some of Jess’ story? (p. 189-190)

"Dad shakes his head. 'Jess, the Bible is very clear about the issue of homosexuality' [...]. In terms of our Confession of Faith... the Mennonite church has been clear about our position. People have made very strong theological arguments.'

'Dad, I'm not a theological argument, I'm not a church policy, and I am not an issue of biblical interpretation. I'm your daughter'" (195).

Pancakes

Jess' interactions with her brothers are pretty easy after returning home. They talk about her dad, why she left and, to a certain extent, how they feel about it. Given the dysfunction of their parents, how do you think the functional relationships of the siblings have come to be? (p. 192)

Jess' dad is finally brought home after their disastrous first encounter, causing the Klassens to hold a family meeting. He says that they didn't know what else to do with Jess, and tells her "It wasn't like that" when she accuses him of being afraid that he would lose his job if he had a queer daughter. What other possible reasons could he have? Do you think Jess was right? (p. 194)

The meeting between Shea and Jess' family is not revealed in the book. Discuss how you think this meeting took place. (p. 195)

"I want to go home.

And here I am [...]. I want to call myself the prodigal son, but the story doesn't fit - I haven't come grovelling and I won't say I'm sorry. But I feel at the mercy of my family tonight because somewhere on the way home I made a promise to myself to stay, and it's time to trust myself and stop running. It's also time to trust them.

I'm proud of myself tonight. If there's a moment when I'm tempted to trivialize - to tell myself that it wasn't so bad, that these years of separation and hurt weren't so hard - I will remind myself that getting to the steps of my parents' house was no easy task" (196).

Powerful Sensation of Life Under the Tongue — Nicole Brossard, Museum of Bone and Water

Jess begins by talking to 'you'. Whom do you think she is addressing? (p. 196)

Do you recognize anything about the title of this chapter? Nicole Brossard is a French-Canadian queer poet whose book, *Museum of Bone and Water* (*Musée de l'os et de l'eau*) was nominated for a Governor General's Award in 1999. From a review of Brossard's book:

"Museum of Bone and Water bears not only upon its excursions into reliquaries of water and bone, repositories of hope and great beauty as well as reminders of faith and authenticity, it also bears upon our bodies — of flesh, writing, water, work, etc." (Judith Fitzgerald, monstersandcritics.com, 2008).

Why do you think Braun used it as the title of this chapter? (p. 196).

Here are some reflections from an SCM interview with her:

“Brossard is one of my favourite poets in Canada. She’s a wise woman; she’s an elder in the world of feminist queer poetics. ‘Powerful Sensation of Life Under the Tongue’ is the title of a poem in her book, *The Museum of Bones and Water*.

This last chapter is a huge shift in [Jess’] life. She’s going home; she’s finally feeling her life under her tongue. It brought to mind ideas of when you take medicine, sometimes you have to hold it under your tongue for a minute. The idea of that powerful sensation — that sentence leaves a lot to the imagination; it could be positive or negative. I didn’t want to end the book in a way that was extremely pat and easy. The two characters are just sitting on a step, looking out onto a bland scene in the Prairies. She ends up where she came from, and that’s a powerful sensation as well.”

Jess has grown a lot through the course of this book, and on the last page she is finally being realistic about her family, her personal relationships and her place in the world. Fast-forward ten years. Where do you think Jess will be? What will she be doing? Will she still be *Somewhere Else*? (p. 196)

“Speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body’s growth in building itself up in love” (Ephesians 4:15-16 NRSV).

Last Session: Unspoken Words...

Jess has come full-circle, returning home to be an agent of healing and transformation in her family, confronting silences of the past. Coming home, a central theme of Jan Guenther Braun’s novel, seems to contrast with the title theme, ‘somewhere else’ (referred to on p. 121 of the novel). Why do you think this is the case? Do you see any connection to the church and to issues of inclusion and liberation today?

In your own life and experience, are there times you have come to see familiar situations with new eyes? What ideas, characters or struggles have you identified with most strongly in this novel? How have your ideas and values around social justice, fairness, or faith been impacted?

Read the opening quotation on the inside cover of this Discussion Guide, then the passage from Ephesians above. In this light, how might the issues in this novel relate to the many forms of oppression—and solidarity—in our world?

What are you taking away from this book and discussion—what learnings, inspiration, questions, commitments or hopes?

www.scmcanada.org



Toll-free 1-8-PROPHETIC
info@scmcanada.org

YOUR LOCAL CONTACT:

Download or order this resource
www.scmcanada.org/somewhereelse