

Syd Arthur

Book Group
Discussion
Guide



Ellen Frankel

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BOOK GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. In the beginning of the novel, Syd walks through the grocery store with an empty shopping cart. What is the author trying to convey? When Syd fills her cart up with the ingredients for making a Shabbat dinner, what is she hungry for?
2. Part of Rachel's argument in convincing her parents to get her a dog for her bat mitzvah was based on the notion of *tikkun olam*--repairing the world. As you follow Levi in the novel, how did he serve as a catalyst in Syd's process of *tikkun olam*?
3. When Syd installs an Invisible Fence to keep Levi safe in the yard while giving him the illusion of freedom, she muses that it's "a microcosm of suburbia." What does she mean by this?
4. After the car accident, Syd's grief takes her to Rachel's elementary school, where she reflects on the passage of time and the fate of the boys in the car. This grief opens long-buried wounds. Were you surprised to learn about baby Rae? How did her parents deal with the loss, and how did they relate to Syd around this loss? How did that shape how Syd has lived up to this point in the novel, especially as it relates to her attempts to seek fulfillment?
5. When Rachel comes home for Thanksgiving, Gary comments to Syd that he's pleased that she "looks as though she hasn't gained a pound." What does this comment convey?
6. Syd and her friends spend a lot of time talking about diets and weight. Do they feel pressure in this culture to be a certain weight? Do they believe they can attain happiness by a number on the bathroom scale?
7. Describe the tension between Syd's mother, Estelle, and Syd's mother-in-law, Arlene. How do you experience Estelle during Thanksgiving when she says "Isn't this just perfect?" after she has complained about Arlene to Syd? Why do you think she does not say directly what she feels?
8. Eventually Syd decides to deal with her inability to sleep and her thoughts about Sierra by going downstairs to eat some Thanksgiving pie. Afterwards she has the following insight: "I'm so busy obsessing about weight, I realize in an instant that comes as quickly as it goes that I am no longer thinking about girls like Sierra, who have strong hands and join the Peace Corps to bring aid to the trouble spots of the world. No, I'm back in my own head in suburbia, tackling trouble spots of my own--my stomach, hips and thighs. And just to be certain that my focus is where it needs to be, I cut another sliver of pie to eat, and yell at myself for eating." What is going on with Syd here?

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9. Jodi leaves the lecture when she finds out they're in the wrong room, but Syd refuses to budge. Are you surprised that Syd decides to stay? Why or why not?
10. When "Scott Someone" is lecturing about Buddhism, he tells the following story: "A novice monk once spoke to a Zen master, asking, 'Master, tell me. What is it you did before you reached enlightenment?' The Zen master replied, 'I carried water and chopped wood.' 'And tell me, Master,' the young monk continued, 'what did you do after you attained enlightenment?' The Zen master replied, 'I carried water and chopped wood.'" What is being conveyed in this story? Is this true of Syd's story?
11. During the Passover Seder, Syd reflects that "we all seem to make our golden calves and pay homage to them, believing that they are what will bring happiness." In the first half of the book, what would you say Syd's golden calf was? By the end of the book, how has Syd's life changed with respect to where she seeks happiness?
12. Discuss Syd's transition from *Mitzraiym*--the narrow place--to her land following with milk and honey.
13. Over lunch at the country club Syd's friends confront her about her spiritual quest and her canceling of their Mah Jongg nights. Is Syd being fair to her friends? Do you think Syd moving in another direction threatens her friends? Do you predict that their friendship will sustain this tension?
14. How would you characterize Syd and Gary's marriage? What do you think brought them together? Do you imagine they'll stay together? If so, what will keep them together?
15. Discuss the parallel between Levi's breaking through the Invisible Fence and Syd's decision to celebrate her birthday at the ashram. What does it mean that Syd finds herself driving to pick up Levi with her eyes open as she heads down Pleasant Street so she won't miss the turn to 8 Middle Way Drive?
16. Discuss why Bodee changed the name of his bed & breakfast from the Powhatten Inn to the Firefly Inn. How does this reflect a major theme in Syd's life and in following a spiritual path?
17. Bodee quotes Heraclitus, saying "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man," and Lin Chi, saying "When hungry eat your rice, when tired close your eyes. Fools may laugh at me, but wise men will know what I mean." How does Syd manifest these ideas in the book?
18. Bodee talks about the problem with labels, saying, "Once you begin labeling, once you begin putting things in boxes, you risk losing the essence, the core nature of the thing." Do you agree with this statement? When Syd's friends ask her, as a Jubu, if she's more Jewish or Buddhist, she thinks back to the time when she told Bodee that she was surprised to learn that a tomato is a fruit and not a vegetable. He handed her a tomato and told her to take a bite, saying, "See? No fruit, no vegetable, only tomato!" What did he mean, and why does she think about that moment when her friends ask her the above question?
19. When Syd returns to Mah Jongg with Barbara Cohen, there are tensions at the table. What is going on here?
20. In conversation with Rabbi Jacob during Rosh Hashana, and with Bodee soon afterward, the theme of "living out your name" is discussed. Bodee tells Syd the story of Rabbi Zusya. What does it mean to live out your name? How does this relate to Syd Arthur? To Bodee?

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21. When Syd and Jodie are watching Melanie's field hockey game, the theme of time hovers over their conversation. What does Syd mean when she reflects, "how fast time flies by, how if you don't really open your eyes, really wake up to what is happening, you can find yourself at the end of your life asking 'where did the time go?'" What time is it in Syd's life?
22. Syd talks about the idea of *dharma candy*, which a visiting Zen master discussed. She explains, "He was referring to the enticements we get caught in, the glittery, beckoning merchandise, the trappings of spiritual traditions--the necklaces, bracelets, and clothing, the statues and knickknacks, the accessories of a spiritual life that, like candy, may be tempting, but don't come close to the true nourishment of a spiritual path." Do you believe religion/spirituality has become a commodity in our society? Discuss.
23. On the 7-day silent retreat, Syd is relieved to find that there is no gift shop and no cafe. Did this surprise you?
24. Bodee often tells Syd how Golden loves Levi's youth and energy. What is he saying here? While Syd is seeking a spiritual teacher, what is Bodee seeking?
25. Why does Syd choose to tell Bodee about baby Rae?
26. When Syd is having tea with Bodee after Golden's death, she worries that Bodee will be lonely. "What are you going to do, Bodee?" she asks him, thinking of him having lost his wife and now his dog. Bodee smiles at Syd and places his hand on her cheek, saying, "What am I going to do, Syd? Well, we have just finished our tea, so come now, and follow me into the kitchen. It's time to wash the teapot and the teacup." What is Bodee saying here? What is he teaching Syd?
27. Bodee asserts that "It's often when we think we can't leave that we run in all different directions. Once we know we're free to leave, to explore, we often find the sacredness in where we've been all along." What do you think about this?
28. Toward the end of the book Syd is meeting her Mah Jongg group for Donna's birthday lunch. Before going over to the table where her friends are seated, she looks at the empty seat waiting for her, wanting to claim her chair but also knowing she can no longer occupy that space in quite the same way. What does she mean?
29. At Donna's birthday lunch, Barbara is convinced Syd has done something different to her looks. What is she seeing?
30. Name some key experiences in Syd's spiritual search. Who do you believe contributed to Syd's awakening, and in what way?
31. After Syd finds the writings from her childhood about baby Rae, she says, "My soul at the age of 10 is my soul at the age of 44." What does she mean?
32. How does Syd's spiritual path affect her feelings about dieting and losing weight?
33. How has Bodee prepared Syd for moving forward after his death?
34. Ji Hwang passed down the teapot and teacups to Bodee and now they are Syd's. What is being passed here?

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35. Do you think Syd and Gary's relationship has changed during this time period? What do you think is strong in their marriage? Weak in their marriage? How do you feel about Gary?
36. Do you think the changes in Syd will affect Rachel? If so, how?
37. Do you agree with Syd's choice in where she spread's Bodee's ashes? Why did she choose this spot?
38. The book begins and end with Gary asking Syd if she's awake. Discuss these two moments and how they differ.

About the Author

Ellen Frankel lives in Marblehead, Massachusetts with her husband, two children, and dog, Karma. Trained as a clinical social worker, she worked in the field of eating disorders in both outpatient and residential settings.

She is the co-author of *Beyond a Shadow of a Diet: The Therapist's Guide to Treating Compulsive Eating* and *The Diet Survivor's Handbook: 60 Lessons in Eating, Acceptance and Self-Care*, and the author of *Beyond Measure: A Memoir About Short Stature and Inner Growth*.

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THIS DOWNLOADABLE Book Group Discussion Guide for *Syd Arthur* is available on the author's website (www.authorellenfrankel.com) and at www.pearlsong.com/sydarthur.htm.



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FICTION / CONTEMPORARY WOMEN
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Prince Siddhartha, raised behind palace walls and showered with every extravagance, abandoned his protected life to embark on a spiritual journey. He ultimately reached enlightenment and became known as the Buddha, which means "one who is awake." He then spent his life teaching that all have the potential to awaken...

Meet Syd Arthur! Living in the cloistered world of suburbia, Syd is a middle-aged Jewish woman who is *potentially* awake, but likes to start her day with a strong cup of coffee, just in case. Her daughter has just left for college and her diet is once again off track. While for most of her life she's been convinced that happiness can be attained by a magic number on the bathroom scale—or a really great shopping day at Bloomingdale's—she finds herself in the grocery store with an empty cart wondering if there just might be something more.

When East unexpectedly meets West, Syd embarks on a journey as a spiritual seeker. Soon she's in over her chakras as her search takes her from yoga studio to meditation hall to ashram gift store to the pages of *Zensational* catalogue. Her Mah Jongg group insists it's merely a midlife crisis. But nothing's going to stop Syd's journey toward Nirvana—not even the hottest sale at Nordstrom's. Follow Syd as she finds her bliss and discovers a richness that rivals a Godiva truffle, making for one delicious enlightenment.

"Syd Arthur's journey toward enlightenment is a laugh-out-loud adventure full of wit and wisdom. This book will touch your spirit and funny bone, awaken your senses, and nourish your soul."

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