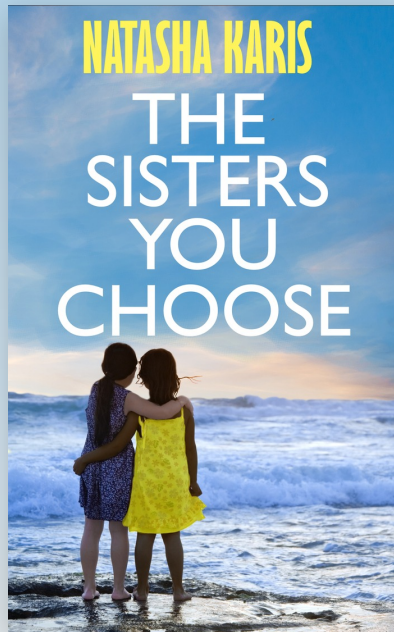




BOOK CLUB KIT

The Sisters You Choose

NATASHA KARIS

A Broken, Not Beaten novel

Discussion Guide · 31 Questions

*“Some sisters you are born with.
Some you choose.”*

Knockfarraig & Crookstown, Co. Cork

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

A note for whoever is hosting

Two things worth knowing before you open the discussion.

THIS GUIDE CONTAINS SPOILERS

Pages 4 and 5 assume everyone has finished the book. Page 6 discusses the ending directly and is marked. If someone in your group is still reading, stop at the end of page 4.

ON THE SUBJECT MATTER

This novel deals with domestic abuse, coercive control, suicide and terminal illness. It does so honestly rather than sensationally, but the honesty is the point, and it lands hard.

Statistically, in a group of eight women, at least two will have lived some version of this. They may not have told anyone. They may not have named it as abuse even to themselves — which is one of the things the novel is about.

You do not need to manage that, and you certainly should not go looking for it. But three small things make a real difference:

- Say at the start that anyone can pass on any question, no explanation needed.
- Let the conversation stay about Gabrielle. People disclose sideways, through a character, when they are not ready to disclose directly — and that is a complete conversation in itself.
- Have the resources on the last page to hand. Not read aloud. Just there.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

There are far more questions here than any group needs. Pick six or seven. The ones marked with a rose are the ones that reliably open a room.

If your group prefers to read aloud, page 7 has four passages chosen for that, each with a single prompt.

THE BOOK

About *The Sisters You Choose*

Everyone thinks they know what Gabrielle Ellis did. Nobody knows she wrote it all down. Her daughter is about to read it.

Ten years ago, the acclaimed novelist Gabrielle Ellis killed her husband and walked into the sea. She left behind a six-year-old daughter and a country that has never stopped talking about it.

Now Abbie Ellis visits her mother's grave for the first time. Not to mourn. Not to forgive. Then a woman steps out of the rain, says she was a friend of Abbie's mother, and hands her a book — the last one Gabrielle ever wrote, and the only one she never published. Written for an audience of one.

ABOUT NATASHA KARIS

Natasha Karis is an Irish author based in Cork. She writes contemporary, emotional women's fiction that dives into heavy subjects — grief, abuse, addiction — but leaves the reader with hope. Many of her novels are set in the fictional coastal town of Knockfarraig, inspired by Youghal, Co. Cork. She shares her writing life with three children, a cocker spaniel and her husband.

IN THE AUTHOR'S OWN WORDS

I shelved this novel for many years as I did not want to glorify domestic violence even a fraction. Truth told, it was a frightening subject, and I was afraid of the backlash. What made me push on was the thought that I could give the women who have died a voice.

— from the Author's Note

THE BROKEN, NOT BEATEN SERIES

Standalone stories of broken people finding hope again, set in the neighbouring Irish towns of Knockfarraig and Crookstown. They share a coastline and the occasional face, and can be read in any order.

Opening the conversation

TO START

1. Before Abbie opened her mother's book, what did you believe had happened in that house? Did you want to be right?
2. Whose side were you on when you began, and had that changed by the end?
3. The novel is told in two books — Abbie's present and Gabrielle's written past. Which did you find yourself hurrying back to?

GABRIELLE

4. 🌸 Gabrielle insists: "I don't want you to close this book thinking of me as a victim... I chose to stay." Did you accept that? Can a choice made in those conditions still be called a choice — and what does she gain by calling it one?
5. She writes that love did work: it softened Liam and took the fight out of him. But she also writes, "while he softened, I hardened... This I believe, caused my illness." Was her strategy a success, a failure, or both at once?
6. 🌸 "The question should never be why does the woman stay, but why does the man act like that?" Be honest — which question had you been asking?
7. Gabrielle hid the Galway house from Liam, and calls that omission her mistake. Is she right to take that on?
8. She was a novelist who spent a career hiding herself inside other people's stories, and then, at the very end, wrote it straight. Why do you think the truth needed her own name on it?

LIAM

9. The novel gives Liam a childhood — the dark room, the silence, the metal door. "Monsters are born from sad stories." Did knowing where his violence came from change how you judged it? Should it?
10. 🌸 Gabrielle says he was "capable of terrible, wrong acts... but he was also the kindest person I ever met." Could you hold both of those at the same time while reading — and does the book ask you to forgive him, or only to understand him?
11. Abbie grew up in a house where her father smiled down from every wall. Which Liam is the true one: her grandparents' or her mother's?

Sadie, Abbie, and the town

SADIE AND THE FRIENDSHIP

12. Sadie's mother explained her daughter's skin with a story about the Spanish Armada and the Black Irish. What did that lie cost Sadie — and why was Gabrielle simply *naming* her race such a turning point?
13. 🌸 Gabrielle saw the bruises and did not lift the phone. She carries it for the rest of her life. Does the novel let her off? Should it?
14. For much of Abbie's half of the story, Sadie is abrasive, evasive and hard to like. When did you start trusting her? Did the author make you wait too long, or exactly long enough?
15. "Some sisters are destined never to be friends, forced to exist alongside the other through birth. Then there are others that appear in your life when you need them most." Who is yours?

ABBIE

16. Abbie remembers nothing of her mother, and the novel names it: dissociative amnesia. What did you make of a grief with its object erased — and of her line, "I remember you now"?
17. 🌸 At the end, Abbie leaves Joe over a pinch of skin and a joke about her weight. Was that proportionate? Would you have recognised it — and would you have said so to a friend?
18. She could have hit Maureen. She hugged her instead, and said, "You're released now." What did that cost her, and what did it buy?

MAUREEN AND KNOCKFARRAIG

19. Maureen was cruel to a child, protected her brother, and was frightened of him herself. Is she a villain? Does the novel think so?
20. The town treated Abbie as a piece of gossip for ten years. What does the novel have to say about the people standing at the edge of a tragedy — and are they only spectators?
21. Gabrielle asks who benefits from believing that an abuser is an obvious monster. Who does?

THE IMAGE AT THE CENTRE

22. 🌸 The rainbow roses on the grave turn out to be white roses, cut at the stem and stood in coloured water — the cut is what lets the colour in, and the flower is changed by what it drinks. Sit with that as an image for this novel. Who in this book is the rose?

DISCUSSION · PART THREE

The ending

Do not open this page until everyone has finished the book.

23. 🌟 Gabrielle could not choose whether to die, only what her death would mean. She wrote: “The only thing I can choose is the aftermath.” Was taking the blame an act of love, of control, or of a woman finally getting to decide something?
24. She asks Abbie to understand that Sadie “killed your father out of love. Out of love for me... There was no hate involved.” Do you accept that? Does Sadie?
25. Ten seconds, one knife, one person who walked in at the wrong moment. How much of what follows is anyone’s fault?
26. 🌟 The ALS diagnosis reframes everything that came before it. Did knowing she was dying change how you read her decision to stay — or had she already made that decision for other reasons?
27. Sadie ran, and left a six-year-old behind. She calls it cowardice. Abbie forgives everything except that. Would you?
28. Abbie keeps Sadie’s secret but sends the tapes to the papers. Is that justice? Is it enough?
29. Gabrielle wanted the record to exist partly so Sadie could get custody — a safety net for a daughter she was afraid to leave with Liam. How did that land, given what you had been told about him?
30. The headstone reads: *Writer. Wife. Mother. Sister. Friend.* Underneath: *Love saves us all.* After everything, does the novel earn that line — and does it want you to believe it, or to argue with it?

TO END ON

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31. Nearly everyone in this book does harm, and nearly everyone is doing the best they know how with what they have. Is that true of every single person in it — or is there one you cannot extend it to?

Four passages, four questions

No woman falls for a guy who treats her badly. No woman sets out to love a monster. They are kind at the start. They treat you better than anyone ever has... It isn't like the abuse starts early on because that would be simple to walk away from. It starts when you are invested.

Ask: Is this the version of it you had in your head before you read this book?

We stay because we don't want to give up on the person we love. We stay because we see they are so much better than their actions... We stay because we are ashamed to admit to anyone that we failed. We stay in the hope it will change. Until it changes us.

Ask: Which of those reasons surprised you? Which one would have been yours?

In a way, I was right. Love can change people. It did soften your father, it took the fight from him. What I didn't factor was while he softened, I hardened. While his walls crumbled, I picked up those bricks and built my own around me.

Ask: Is there a version of this story in which Gabrielle wins?

Life is more beautiful when death hangs over you, not less. I only wish I knew that before.

Ask: What would you write down, if you were writing it for one person?

IF YOUR GROUP LIKES TO THEM IT

- **Tea and scones.** There is a chapter called Scones, and half the emotional business of this novel is conducted over a pot of tea. Barry's or Lyons, and let people take sides.
- **Rainbow roses for the table.** White roses, a slit up the stem, and jars of food-colouring water. They take about a day. Make them the night before and let the group work out what they are for.
- **The coast.** Knockfarraig is Youghal, Co. Cork. Worth two minutes of looking it up together — the beach, the sea wall, the long strand Gabrielle walks.

IF ANY OF THIS WAS CLOSE TO HOME

Support

You do not have to be sure. You do not have to have a plan. You only have to tell one person.

Ireland — Women's Aid National Freephone Helpline

1800 341 900, 24 hours a day · womensaid.ie

United Kingdom — National Domestic Abuse Helpline

0808 2000 247, 24 hours a day

United States — National Domestic Violence Hotline

1-800-799-7233

If you are outside these countries, findahelpline.com will point you to a service near you.

MORE FROM NATASHA KARIS

The Broken, Not Beaten series — standalone stories of broken people finding hope again, set in Knockfarraig and Crookstown. Books 1–4 are available together in one box set.

Love Saves Us All — an exclusive companion story. Gabrielle kept a notebook in her last months: lists of what she got wrong, what was never her fault, and what she would say to a woman standing where she once stood. It is free to newsletter subscribers.

WOULD YOUR GROUP LIKE TO MEET THE AUTHOR?

Natasha is happy to join book clubs by video call where she can. Get in touch through natashakarisbooks.com and say when you are meeting.

AND IF THE BOOK WAS WORTH THE EVENING

Reviews are how books like this one find the readers who need them. If your group enjoyed it, even a single sentence on Amazon or Goodreads makes a real difference — and a book club leaving several at once makes more.

This kit may be freely printed and shared for book club and library use.

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