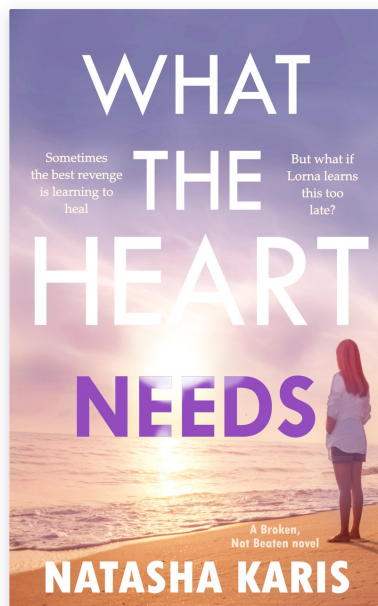




BOOK CLUB KIT

What The Heart Needs

NATASHA KARIS

Discussion Guide • 29 Questions

*“Don’t get even, don’t become them.
Show them who you are.”*

SARA

A note for whoever is hosting

Two things worth knowing before you open the discussion.

THIS GUIDE CONTAINS SPOILERS

Parts One and Two assume everyone has finished the book. Part Three, on page 6, discusses the killing and the ending directly and is marked. If someone in your group is still reading, stop at the end of page 5.

ON THE SUBJECT MATTER

This is the darkest book in the series, and it does not soften. It opens with a woman planning a murder and it means it. It deals with heroin addiction and withdrawal in close physical detail, with an overdose, with a young woman's torture, rape and death read out in a courtroom, with a father's violence, and with a mother who kills and then has to live inside what she has done.

Almost every group will contain someone who has loved an addict. Some will contain someone bereaved by violence. You do not need to manage that, and you should not go looking for it. 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 Lorna and Sara. People speak sideways, through a character, when they are not ready to speak directly — and that is a whole conversation in itself.
- Have the resources on the last page to hand. Not read aloud. Just there.

One further note. Chapter Forty reads out Sara's injuries as the court heard them. It is the hardest page in the book and some readers skip it. It is worth saying out loud that skipping it was a reasonable thing to do, and that the discussion does not require anyone to have read it.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

There are more questions here than any group needs. Pick six or seven. The ones marked with a star ★ are the ones that reliably open a room. If your group likes to read aloud, page 8 has four passages chosen for it, each with a single prompt.

About *What The Heart Needs*

It is one in the morning and Lorna Thomas is sitting in a parked car outside a house she has watched for months. She has a taser, a plan, and four faces taped to her kitchen wall. By dawn, the first name will be crossed off.

Except Ryan is already dying when she gets inside — and Lorna, a carer by trade and the woman who once fed him breakfast every morning of the year he loved her daughter, finds she cannot let him go that cheaply.

Sara has been dead for over a year. The man who killed her was found not guilty by reason of insanity, and is out again inside twelve months. Lorna wants him to suffer, and nothing is going to stop her.

What she has not allowed for is that the boy in her spare room has been carrying Sara all this time too — and that almost everything she believes about how her daughter died is wrong.

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.

TWO THINGS AT THE FRONT OF THE BOOK

The novel opens on an epigraph, and the whole argument of the book is already in it:

An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind.

— MAHATMA GANDHI

There is also a playlist — fourteen songs the author wrote to, from Fleetwood Mac's *Sara* to Birdy's *People Help The People*. The link is printed in the front of the book. It makes very good background for the evening, and one of the tracks will change how you read the last chapter.

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

A woman in a parked car, and the boy she came to kill.

TO START

- 1 The book opens with a woman telling us plainly: “*I’m here to kill him. And by dawn, I’ll have followed through.*” Were you on her side from that first page? Did you stay there?
- 2 Lorna’s present is told in present tense; her memories of Sara in the past. Ryan writes Sara in the present tense too, because “*in my memories, she’s alive. On the page, I want to keep her that way.*” What did that do to your reading of the book?
- 3 ♦ Finding Ryan mid-overdose, Lorna could simply stand and watch. Instead she clears his airway and gives him naloxone — “*I’ll be damned if he gets away with dying this easily.*” Was that cruelty or mercy? Do you think she knew?

LORNA AND RYAN

- 4 She puts him through withdrawal with no methadone and two buckets, wanting him to feel every sensation. And then: gardening gloves so he can’t tear his own skin, ginger biscuits for the nausea, a banana for the cramps. At what point did you notice she had stopped punishing him and started nursing him?
- 5 ♦ Ryan wakes, understands exactly what is happening, and asks for one thing: “*Please, Ginger. Kill me.*” He doesn’t fight, doesn’t run when the door is left unlocked, and cleans her kitchen instead. What is he actually doing in that house?
- 6 Lorna has let the house rot on purpose — “*Better to cover the couch with piles of crap than see the empty spot where she used to read. Dirt is what I deserve.*” Of everything Ryan could have done, why is scrubbing a kitchen the thing that starts to move her?
- 7 Two small objects turn this entire book: a frayed bracelet Sara made, still on Ryan’s wrist, and her photograph tucked down the side of his couch. Was that enough to turn you as well?
- 8 Ryan’s notebook gives Lorna a daughter she never had access to — the birthmark, the whistle in her sleep, the orchids. Would you want that from the person you had blamed? Could you take it from them?

Sara, and the town

Who she was, and everything that was built to make her.

SARA

- 9 Sara at sixteen, standing in her mother's green Debs dress — "*Do you feel special now?*" And Sara at eighteen, on Debs night itself: "*Look where love got you. Love made you miserable. The last person I want to end up like is you.*" Which Sara did you carry through the book?
- 10 ♦ Lorna refuses to sanctify her: "*I won't idolise her or reduce her to a 2D character with a shiny surface, the flaws wiped clean.*" Did the novel keep that promise — or does Sara come back a little too perfect through Ryan's pages?
- 11 The defence reduces Sara to "*a recovering addict*"; the papers run the same photograph of her in the green dress; the country moves on. What is the novel saying about who gets counted as a victim, and who has to earn it?
- 12 Sara once explained her own rule about pain: "*when someone wants control and you can't get out of the situation, if you don't react, they lose.*" Ryan uses it at the end to tell Lorna how her daughter died. Is that a comfort, or the most unbearable page in the book?

TIM, AND THE TOWN

- 13 ♦ Tim hid Sara's teenage drug use, kept Ryan away from the trial and from Lorna, and buried the truth about what happened at the docks — all, he says, to protect her: "*You were a risk to yourself.*" Was protection what he was doing? Is there a version of him you can forgive?
- 14 Sara's diary, at fifteen: "*If he can buy the stuff, who is he to say I can't take it?*" She was helping herself from her father's stash. Where does the novel actually put the beginning of this story?
- 15 Carraigshill: an American factory that closed overnight, a town of half measures, teenagers on every corner with "*no spark, no animation*" — "*It's hope that's missing.*" How much of what happens does the book lay at the town's door rather than any one person's? Is that letting somebody off?
- 16 Lorna picks Carmel up off a street corner, learns she was the one who first gave Sara the drug, and tells her: "*It's not your fault.*" She means it. Could you have meant it?
- 17 Patrick asks one question at his interview: "*Can you keep me from going into a home?*" Lorna insists the job saved her, not him. What is Patrick doing in a novel about revenge — and did his death land differently because of where she was when the call came?

DISCUSSION • PART THREE

The killing, and after

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

- 18 ♦ Killing Troy takes about ten minutes and feels like nothing: “*It is like putting out the washing; a task needed to be done.*” No thrill, no relief, no vindication. Did you want her to feel something? Did part of you want it to have worked?
- 19 Exposing Oliver’s affair to his wife gives her genuine joy — “*vengeance has been better than I could even imagine.*” Why does that revenge satisfy when the murder doesn’t?
- 20 Sara comes to her in a dream, shaking her head, crying — and Lorna remembers her at seven, sobbing over a jar of dead caterpillars: “*If you kill someone, you go to hell.*” Is that Sara, or Lorna’s own conscience wearing her daughter’s face? Does the novel want you to decide?
- 21 Ryan never wavers: “*Good. I’m glad it was one of us that killed him.*” He is the only person in the book who thinks she did right. Is he wrong?
- 22 ♦ “*Don’t get even, don’t become them, show them who you are.*” Sara’s line becomes the book’s whole answer — the graves, the lists, the basketball court. Is that genuinely revenge, as Ryan insists, or is “revenge” just the word the book needs to get Lorna to agree to healing?

DISCUSSION • PART THREE • CONTINUED

TO END ON

-
- 23 Nick arrives to warn her, and offers to run: “*For you? Yes.*” She says no. Was that the moment she was really sentenced — before any court got near her?
- 24 She signs the house and her bank account over to Ryan and confesses. He calls it ruining everything they were building: “*How can you help anyone if you’re in prison?*” She says every charity in Sara’s name is tainted while she lies. Who is right?
- 25 ♦ In court she says she would do it again — and then that what she truly wishes is that she had confronted him, listened, perhaps even forgiven him: “*Then again, maybe I can only say this because he is dead.*” Can both of those be true at once?
- 26 The judge gives her the twelve-year minimum, then suspends four years and backdates them to the day Sara was murdered, “*as I believe this is the actual day your sentence started.*” Fair? Too generous? Nowhere near enough?
- 27 The women on the landing bang their doors as she walks in — “*You got justice for your daughter.*” Lorna calls it a respect she doesn’t deserve. Does the novel agree with her?
- 28 The title lands on the last page: her mind needed revenge, her heart needed something else entirely. “*We all have cracks. We just need to catch and hold onto the love leaking out instead of gluing them shut tight.*” Did the ending earn that — or did you want the book to stay harder than it finally does?
- 29 Sara’s death ends up putting her mother, her father and the man she loved in one car on the road to Inishmore. Lorna calls that a legacy. Is it a consolation you accept — or is the book asking you to accept too much?

Four passages, four questions

People always talk about time when they speak about death. About time being a healer. I'll tell you now, time heals nothing. Loss doesn't leave you. The only thing it leaves is shock.

ASK: IS THAT TRUE TO ANYTHING YOU HAVE KNOWN — OR IS IT LORNA AT HER LOWEST?

When you murder someone, they never leave. You carry a part of them around always ... Sara I could carry, but Troy, he is harder to lift.

ASK: WHOSE PRESENCE DO YOU CARRY THAT YOU NEVER CHOSE?

Silence I've found, is hollow, silence is empty and devoid of love. What I really wanted is peace and that doesn't hide in silence. Peace hides in you.

ASK: WHERE HAVE YOU GONE LOOKING FOR PEACE AND FOUND ONLY QUIET?

I've learnt if you don't try to hide or cover them, it's in those cracks that the love gets through.

ASK: WHICH CRACK ARE YOU STILL GLUING SHUT?

IF YOUR GROUP LIKES TO THEME IT

- **Put the playlist on.** It is printed in the front of the book and it is very much part of it — Fleetwood Mac's *Sara*, Gabrielle Aplin's *Stay*, Birdy's *People Help The People*. Low, in the background, for the whole evening.
- **One orchid on the table.** Sara's flower, because they are fighters: "each one is a victory." A supermarket one will do, and everything Lorna eventually becomes is planted along that drive.
- **Soda bread, butter and a pot of tea.** It is what Lorna puts in front of Nick at the kitchen table in the scene that decides the rest of the book. Barry's or Lyons — let people take sides.
- **A pact for the week.** Lorna's second list is small and unglamorous: clean a grave nobody visits, paint over the graffiti, sit with someone and listen. Ask everyone to take one thing off that list before you next meet, and open with it.

IF ANY OF THIS WAS CLOSE TO HOME

Support

You do not have to be over it. You do not have to be coping well. You only have to tell one person.

BEREAVED BY VIOLENCE

Ireland — AdVIC, Advocates for Victims of Homicide, 1800 852 000 · advic.ie. Counselling, peer support and help with the court process.

United Kingdom — SAMM, Support After Murder and Manslaughter · samm.org.uk · and Victim Support · victimsupport.org.uk

United States — Parents of Murdered Children · pomc.org

DRUGS AND ALCOHOL — FOR THE PERSON USING, OR THE PEOPLE AROUND THEM

Ireland — HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline, freephone 1800 459 459, Monday to Friday 9.30am–5.30pm · drugs.ie

United Kingdom — Talk to FRANK · talktofrank.com · and We Are With You · wearewithyou.org.uk

United States — SAMHSA National Helpline, 1-800-662-4357, free and confidential, 24 hours

IF IT FEELS DARKER THAN THAT

Ireland & United Kingdom — Samaritans, 116 123, free, 24 hours · samaritans.org

United States — 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, call or text 988

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

MORE FROM NATASHA KARIS

The Phoenix Will Rise — an exclusive follow-on story, told from three perspectives, showing what Lorna's choices meant for the people around her. It isn't for sale anywhere; it's free to newsletter subscribers at subscribepage.com/whattheheartneeds.

The Broken, Not Beaten series — standalone stories set in Knockarraig and Crookstown, readable in any order.

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.

If the book was worth the evening. Reviews are how stories like this one find the readers who need them. 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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