

JESSIE WITH A COOLER FULL

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

I hope these ideas for questions will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book. ***Caution: there are spoilers in these questions!***

Definitions/roles

1. This novel explores characters coping with their changing roles after the death of a loved one. Nikki must navigate life as a daughter without her mother and her dad must survive as a husband without a wife. How do you define yourself? By the person you are with? Where you work? What you do? How has the definition changed during different periods of your life?
2. How does Nikki define herself at the beginning of the novel, in the middle, at the end?

Character of Jessie

1. Readers react strongly to the character of Jessie. Did you hate him? Why? Did you find he had any redeeming qualities? Is there anything relatable or sympathetic about him?
2. How does Jessie's past affect his attitude toward women?
3. In her penultimate scene with Jessie, Nikki thinks Jessie had loved her, if only for a little while. Do you think that's true? Did Jessie love Nikki for even a moment? Do you think Jessie is capable of feelings of romantic love?
4. Do you think Jessie is a narcissist?
5. Readers have called Jessie a "bad boy." Nothing but trouble. Have you been attracted to a "bad boy" or a "bad girl?" If so, have you acted on that attraction? Finding you could not resist this person whom you find charismatic, even though you know he or she will break your heart?

Character of Nikki

1. Did you have any sympathy for Nikki? Did you care about her character? Do you think her spiral of grief robbed of her ability to think clearly, to make reasonable decisions? Or do you think she was in complete control of everything she did?
2. Do you think Nikki is a narcissist?
3. Nikki's boss mandates therapy through the employee assistance program. Nikki has several therapy sessions with Beatrice, a social worker. Do you think these sessions benefited Nikki? What decisions does Nikki make because of these sessions, if any?

4. Could you forgive Nikki's adultery against a devoted husband? Do you think the affair was completely wrong? Or do you think Nikki's affair with Jessie helped her heal and gave her something she needed to push forward?
5. Does Nikki's obsession with Jessie constitute a temporary addiction only? Or a true discovery on Nikki's part as to a suppressed part of her genuine identity?
6. Do you think it is possible to love more than one person like that at a time? Do you think Nikki's feelings for Jessie are indeed love? What about her feelings for Pete?
7. Many films and novels portray women as emotionally and physically unstable. Does the portrait of Nikki further stigmatize women as emotionally and physically unstable?
8. Would you describe Nikki relationship with her dad as co-dependent? Why or why not? Have you ever felt ambivalence toward a beloved parent for relying on you too much?
9. What did you think about Nikki's relationship with Carl? With Shasta? With Pete?
10. The novel explores the concept of power, beginning in Chapter 1 with the "two-ketchup rule." In Chapter 26 ("Full Moon on the Rise") Nikki thinks, I have the power, and I control whether you get it, and Jessie thinks, I have the power, and I control whether you give it to me. In your opinion, did Nikki at any time hold power over the relationship with Jessie in the sense that she could get him to do what she wanted? Or did Jessie always hold the power?
11. After the night on the beach when Jessie and Nikki witness the turtle, Nikki is surprised to meet Kit inside the tower. When Kit calls her out for her behavior, she kisses him. Did this surprise you? Or were you already sold on the idea that Nikki was so unhinged, anything she did would not surprise you?
12. Do you think it would have been awful if Nikki had ended up with Jessie?
13. In the Epilogue, we learn that Nikki thinks Jessie saved her life. What do you think she meant by that?

Grief, Fate, Destiny, Life

1. Nikki, in a moment of self-reflection, wonders if she's had a touch of bereavement mania. Have you ever experienced bereavement mania? Doing or trying something bizarre, so out of character, to compensate for or escape from your grief?
2. Have you ever been blindsided by grief? Did you find healthy ways to cope? Or not?
3. Why was it so difficult for Nikki to accept her mother's death? For her father?
4. Jessie is experiencing his own grief over the death of his mother; Nikki connects with him on this experience, and it matters to her immensely, making their meeting feel fated.

Do you believe in fate? In destiny? Is there a part of you that thinks fate played a part in Nikki meeting Jessie?

5. Nikki thinks her mother had a hand in how everything played out. On some spiritual, magical level, do you agree?
6. In one of the scenes at the skating rink (Chapter 14, “Roll Bounce”), Nikki tells Jessie she’s coming to the tower the next day as if she’d planned it all along. She thinks, Why not? Why wait? Have you felt this sentiment in your own life, the feeling that life is short and you want to experience everything this life has to offer even if you may pay a price for it, even a heavy price, in the end?

Marriage, Love, Adultery

1. In the last therapy session with Nikki in the novel, Beatrice says, “with the privilege of marriage, comes responsibility and sacrifice. No union is more profound.” (Chapter 51, “Beatrice III.”) Do you agree that no union is more profound than marriage? Do you think that two people become greater than they once were? Why or why not?
2. In a relationship, whether a marriage or a partnership, do you feel like you “belong to” the other person? If so, in what way?
3. How do you define cheating on a partner? Are thoughts enough? Is anything less than sexual intercourse considered cheating?
4. If you are married, did you marry your first love? Do you think you married the right person?
5. What do you think the novel says about marriage? Love? What do you think it has to say about family?
6. Do you think Shasta should tell Pete that Nikki had an affair? Is there any instance in which you would tell someone that their partner is cheating on them/having an affair?

Lagniappe

1. Sense of environment is a theme in the novel. What makes Topsail distinctive? What is the draw for Nikki, for her kids? For Jessie? What parts of Topsail came alive for you, and how was the story enriched by this setting?
2. Did the end of the novel surprise you? Or did you see it coming?
3. Is there any doubt in your mind as to the identity of Victoria’s father? Were there any clues to suggest that he might be Pete?
4. Did you like the novel’s title? What would be a better one?