

# book club!

**It's Okay to Laugh, (Crying is Cool Too)**  
by Nora McInerny

- 1. Do you have personal experience with loss and grief?** How did you cope? How are various experiences similar or different? How did Nora handle the three powerful losses she suffered? If you are going through a bad time now, did reading this book help you in any way?
- 2. Humor plays an important part in both Nora's experience of illness, loss, and grief and in her daily life and writing. How can humor help in such difficult times?** How can one hold on to a sense of humor amid feelings of sadness? What's the particular nature and effect of the dark or gallows humor Aaron and Nora share? Knowing that laughter can also serve as a defense or even be hurtful, however unintentionally, how might one determine what humor is appropriate and what is not?
- 3. Both the title of the book and Nora's podcast (Terrible, Thanks for Asking) suggest that we need more honesty about difficult truths in our everyday interactions and conversations. What's the value of being more honest about how we're feeling?** Why do you think this is difficult for people? What are good ways to explore and express painful truths? When might such personal truths be withheld? In what ways are social media platforms good for these kinds of truths or not? Can we "share" too much?

- 4. Nora is particularly aware of the many emotional responses to her experience. How can one gain self-awareness about suffering, and learn to identify what one is feeling?** Does it require an outside source—an astute friend, a therapist, a clergyperson, for example—to help us understand our emotions during a difficult time, or can a person, in the depths of emotional suffering, identify and express the complexity of grief without help?
- 5. Nora finds effective ways to shield Ralph from profound or overwhelming feelings of loss. How does she do this?** What are the particular challenges of raising children during times of loss?
- 6. Nora confesses that she long struggled with the existential sense that she was “wasting time.” Why does she think this?** To what extent does her extraordinary time spent with Aaron and Ralph, her experience with such overwhelming loss and gain, and the meaningful work she’s doing now seem to have changed that?
- 7. What are the benefits and challenges of accepting the idea that you have “one wild and precious life”?** Do you see this notion as freeing or stressful?
- 8. Describe Aaron. What made him emotionally strong and what were his admirable qualities?** In times of great difficulty, can we choose to be strong, or are we ultimately driven by our innate character?
- 9. Nora says that Aaron and her father “gave [her] the tools... to live life without them.” What were these tools?** How do they serve her?
- 10. Nora tattooed the word “now” on her wrist to remind her to stay focused on the present, to not wander—often anxiously—to thoughts of the past or future. What’s the value of staying in the present?** What other ways are there to maintain such awareness and focus? Isn’t thinking about the past and the future valuable—reminding us of lessons we’ve learned, and as a measure of how far we may have come, and in understanding where our lives may be headed?

**11. Aaron “always had a story to tell, yet always wanted to listen” to Nora’s tales. What’s the value of storytelling?** What did it bring to their relationship? Why is effective, careful listening so powerful and important, and how can we become better listeners?

**12. At the funeral for Eddie, Nora’s high school friend, his cousin asks for specific details and memories to “help... remember him.” Nora also admits to a fading of specific sensations about her father and Aaron. What’s the nature of memory after such loss?** What are its limitations? How can we keep a healthy emotional connection to lost loved ones?

**13. Talk about Nora’s relationship with her mother and each of her siblings. In what ways does each help or challenge her?**

**14. Nora claims that while “serious problems” deserve and require a medical professional, being happy is also something “you have a hand in making, every day.” What does she mean?** What are some specific examples in her life and in yours? Do we always have to focus on happiness? Is it wrong to sometimes feel angry, or sad, or discontent?

**15. Think about Nora’s experience with and observations of Juggalos, the dedicated fans of Insane Clown Posse. What insights does she gain about human emotional and social needs from the experience?**

**16. Chapter 13, “What to Do When the Person You Love Gets Brain Cancer (or Any Cancer)” makes clear that there is no easy, consistent, or common response to illness and grief. How does Nora ultimately decide what is best for her?** How can each of us determine what’s most helpful when confronting such difficulty?

**17. Nora claims that women are “conditioned to be jealous of women who come before and after” them in relationships. Why?** What is the nature of female jealousy? In what ways might jealousy be healthy?

**18. What are the most important qualities or behaviors suggested in Chapter 19, “Who Should You Marry?”**

**19. During a two-day silent retreat, Nora initially struggles with silence but eventually comes to “not hate” it. How can silence be valuable?** Why is it often difficult for many people? What changed Nora’s outlook?

**20. Despite the support of her family and friends, and even the Hot Young Widows Club, Nora says that “grief is lonely.” Why?**

**21. Nora realizes when she stops wearing her wedding ring that not every step or gesture should be a Big Event loaded with meaning. What has led her to this recognize this?** To what extent do people generate meaning that is not connected to an object or gesture? Can letting go of objects freighted with meaning be freeing?

**22. Nora claims that her strength “isn’t superhuman” but “the most human thing of all.” Explain her meaning. How has this been valuable to her?**

**23. Nora says that “even grief is a privilege.” How so?** How can we help someone who has less time and stability to grieve after traumatic loss?

**24. If it’s true “that there is no right thing to say, and perhaps it is okay for language to fail us” in times of grief, than how can we know how to respond to another’s suffering?**

**25. Do you agree with Nora’s claims in Chapter 44 “Lean In” that American culture has perpetuated low expectations for men when it comes to raising children?** Why—and how can we change this outlook? What ideas and behaviors can men adopt as husbands and fathers to strengthen and balance a family?

**26. What helped Nora heal enough to love and be happy again?** How does she integrate Aaron and her memories into her current life?