READING GROUP GUIDE

This reading group guide for ***A Window Opens***includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author **Elisabeth Egan**. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

**Introduction**

When her husband makes an unexpected (and worrisome) career move, Alice Pearse leaves her beloved part-time job as books editor at *You* magazine for a more lucrative position at Scroll, a trendy start-up that promises to be the future of reading. As this mother of three settles into her new job, she believes that she might finally be able to “have it all.” But suddenly, she finds herself awash in corporate lingo and acronyms, on the receiving end of a never-ending stream of inscrutable e-mails and spreadsheets. She’s a suburban mom among Brooklyn hipsters, a stranger in a strange land. Worse still, there is never, ever enough time: for her kids, whom she only ever sees in their pajamas; for her parents, who are struggling with life-altering issues of their own; or for her husband, a former teetotaler who seems to have taken up drinking as an alternate career path. When Alice steps away from her laptop long enough to take inventory of her life, she realizes she might have been asking the wrong question all along: It’s not about whether or not she can have it all, it’s about finding out what she really *wants*. In this heartbreaking and hilarious story of one woman’s struggle to be everything to everyone, Elisabeth Egan gives her readers a candid and relatable tale about the challenges of seeking that elusive concept called *balance*.

**Topics & Questions for Discussion**

1. At the beginning of the book, Alice says that a page has turned; she and her husband are “on to a new chapter” (15). What events lead to this new chapter, and what impact do they have on the Pearse family? How do they deal with the changes, for better or for worse?

2. How does Alice’s friend Susanna react when Alice tells her that she has decided to interview for a full-time job at Scroll? Why does Susanna respond as she does? How do you feel about Susanna’s reaction and about Alice’s decision to apply for a job that will almost certainly have a direct impact on her best friend? Do you feel greater sympathy for one of the characters in particular? If so, why?

3. What kind of pressures and challenges do the main characters face throughout the story, and how do they cope with them? Which methods seem to be the most effective for dealing with these obstacles?

4. How are technology and social media represented in the book? Are they presented positively or negatively—or does the author offer a mostly neutral view? Explain.

5. During Alice’s job interview at Scroll, one of the employees says that the company represents the “intersection of the past and the future.” What does he mean by this? Do you agree with his assessment? How do the characters in the book feel about the MainStreet Company and about Scroll? Are they mostly united in their opinions or is a variety of opinions offered? What seems to influence or determine the side each character takes on this issue?

6. Genevieve recalls George Bernard Shaw’s maxim, “Progress is impossible without change.” What message does the book offer about the themes of progress and change?

7. *A Window Opens* offers a fresh take on the ways we communicate with one another as family, friends, and colleagues. How do the various characters communicate with one another throughout the story? Would you say that they are good communicators? Explain. How does the novel ultimately allow readers to understand and define “good” or “effective” communication?

8. At the anniversary party for Nicholas’s parents, an old friend gives a toast in which he says that the key to Elliot and Judy’s happiness has been their ability to change alongside each other. What does this mean in the context of this story, and how is it applicable in real life?

9. When Alice accepts the job at Scroll, the company allows her to choose a first edition of her favorite book. What book does she choose? Why do you think that she may have been interested in this book in particular? What books do the other employees choose? Are their choices surprising? Does the choice of one’s reading material seem to reveal any information about his or her character? Do you believe that your own book choices reveal information about your character? Discuss.

10. Alice frequently compares herself to other women. Do these comparisons help her in any way or are they more harmful than productive? Alice also frequently reflects upon the past, although she later recalls the popular advice: “Stay in the moment.” Does the book suggest whether or not reflecting upon one’s past is helpful, or does it advise living in the moment and letting the past be the past? Explain.

11. How do the characters in the novel cope with illness and grief? Do they each react the same way? How do people respond to news of the death of Alice’s father? How does Alice feel about their reactions? What does Alice find comforting or useful as she is grieving?

12. Why might the author have chosen the title *A Window Opens* for this novel? What does the title of the novel signify? Where is the title referenced in the book and what figurative examples of “ a window opening” are found throughout? How does the title reinforce or underline the major theme or themes of the novel?

13. What mistakes do the adult characters make, and how do they learn from and correct these mistakes? How do they respond to the mistakes of others? What messages does the book offer about failure, judgment, and forgiveness?

14. Alice writes a letter to her children’s long-time babysitter, Jessie, that she never delivers. What advice does she give to Jessie in this letter? What question or questions does Alice suggest people should ask when they reach adulthood? Do you agree with her advice?

15. Do you feel that Alice made the right choice by accepting the job at Scroll? Do you feel that she made the right choice by leaving the same job later? How did both of her decisions impact those around her? How did her decisions contribute to or detract from her own development and sense of self and well-being? Discuss.

**Enhance Your Book Club**

1. Read and evaluate *A Window Opens* alongside Allison Pearson’s *I Don’t Know How She Does It*and Maria Semple’s*Where’d You Go, Bernadette*. What do these books have in common? How are the characters alike? Who narrates the stories in each, and what points of view are represented? Does any one point of view stand out over the rest? What common experiences do the characters share? What overlapping themes appear among the works? What advice do the books seem to offer those juggling a host of personal and work-related responsibilities? Consider and discuss how the books offer a contemporary cultural portrait when considered together.

2. Read Ann Patchett’s essay “The Bookstore Strikes Back” from her collection *This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage.*Use the essay as a starting place to begin a discussion about book culture and your reading preferences. Are you “agnostic” in your choice of reading materials, as Genevieve describes Alice, or are you devoted exclusively to traditional books or e-books? Create your own design for a great reading environment and discuss your reasons for the designs you choose. Talk about how readers can help to shape, define, and cultivate book culture, publishing, and reading environments. What examples of the cultivation of book culture do you see in your own community? How do you think this could be improved upon?

3. When Alice joins Scroll, she is allowed to choose a first edition of any beloved book. She picks Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. Read this essay. Once you are familiar with the essay, discuss why Alice may have been drawn to this work in particular. Does a reading of the Woolf essay shed any additional light on her character that we could not have gleaned from Egan’s novel alone? If you had the same opportunity to choose any first edition for your own, what book would you choose and why?

4. Start your own book club inspired by Alice. Offer your friends individualized book recommendations. Exchange the books and discuss your reasons for each choice. Ask the people receiving the books to have their own book club and to give out their own recommended titles in the same way, creating a book club chain.

**A Conversation with Elisabeth Egan**

**Can you tell us about your inspiration for *A Window Opens*? What were the novel’s origins? Where and how did you begin?**

The book has its origins in my inability to find a book like it when I was looking for one. I’m the opposite of an escapist reader—I’m drawn to stories that are relatable, or reflective of whatever my life looks like at the time. I have a long history of using fiction as a form of self help—but all of a sudden, I couldn’t find any books about women in my moment of life: approaching middle age, settled down but not settling, listening in on a conference call for work from the waiting room at the orthodontist’s office. My current decade is awash in clichés, all well represented in books: the desperate housewife, the cold-hearted businesswoman. Thankfully, the women I know don’t fall easily into stereotypes, and I decided to write a book about the ones with the nuanced, interesting, messy lives. I started writing at my daughter’s swim team practice and finished the first draft on the train home from work. I approached stealthily, cautiously, telling nobody but my husband and a handful of close friends what I was up to. I’m terrible at keeping secrets so this book was a major breakthrough for me on many levels.

**In your novel, Alice loses her father to a devastating illness. In *Self* magazine, you wrote about the illness and death of your own father. What advice would you offer those who are dealing with a sick or terminally ill parent, those who have recently lost a loved one, or those who wish to help someone who is grieving? Was there any particular literature that you turned to during this time?**

My best advice for all parties: be there. You can’t always be there in person but you can find other ways to show up. I was in my twenties when my dad first got sick, so most of my friends didn’t really speak the language of illness or loss—neither did I—but some of them just instinctively knew what to do. One day I was getting a haircut and my friend showed up with doughnuts. I sat there with her, getting a trim, eating a Boston cream, feeling like one of the most beloved and lucky people in the world even though my dad was in the hospital across town, fighting for his life. When I went to sit with him after the haircut, I felt galvanized. I knew I couldn’t pass along the strength this friend had given to me, but I could share her peace and kindness. Isn’t it amazing what a doughnut can do? As for books: *A Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion, *An Uncertain Inheritance* by Nell Casey, *The Mercy Papers* by Robin Romm, and *The Long Goodbye* by Meghan O’Rourke. There’s no road map of grief, but these are some excellent signposts.

**In the prologue of your novel, we learn that Alice was enamored with books even as a young girl. Was this the case for you as well? What impact did young adult literature have on your life and your identity? What were some of your favorite young adult titles?**

This part of the book is 100 percent autobiographical. I was born into a family of bookworms and had no choice but to become one myself. Reading transported me from a hot, boring afternoon in New Jersey to a cool fall day on Prince Edward Island. It gave me a preview of what it might be like to have a dog or to fall in love. I read a novel set in Vermont and decided to go to college there—and in my house, this was a perfectly logical way to make a choice. Here are the books that carried me through adolescence: anything by L. M. Montgomery, with a bias for the unsung *Emily of New Moon* (apologies to *Anne of Green Gables*); *A Separate Peace* by John Knowles; *The Pigman*by Paul Zindel; *The Outsiders*by S. E. Hinton and anything by Lois Duncan or V. C. Andrews. Like most kids who grew up in the 1980s, I learned a lot from V. C. Andrews.

**Are you an “agnostic” reader, as Genevieve would say, or do you prefer the traditional printed book or e-book exclusively? What do you think is the best formula for a good reading experience?**

I’ll read a page, a screen, a Post-it, or a cereal box—it doesn’t matter as long as the words are interesting, engaging, and in a legible font. (Now that I wear reading glasses—if you must know—I’ve become a little persnickety about the font.) Most of the time, I read fiction in a galley or a manuscript, and when I read on my iPad, it’s usually nonfiction. I bring a bunch of books home from work every night, and I try not to check my phone on the train back to New Jersey. If I’m hooked on one after forty minutes, that’s a good sign. I definitely give preferential treatment to the books I read on the front porch with a glass of wine. Those are my favorites!

**What are your thoughts on traditional publishers and booksellers versus companies like Amazon,which incorporate greater technology? What role do you think technology should play in the literary world?**

So much depends on the reader and what kind of book they’re looking for. I loved my first-generation Kindle. Two of my three kids have e-readers—they’re great for that late-night emergency when you just *have* to get your hands on the next installment of the Shredderman series. I like buying my books at the local bookstore because this gives me a chance to combine my greatest passions: chatting and reading. I love the sociability of the transaction and the little bowl of Werther’s caramels by the cash register. As for technology, I’m only a Luddite when it comes to remote controls, which I think are needlessly complicated. I love the smell of pages; other people love the glow of pixels. The point is to lose yourself in a great story.

**How has *A Window Opens* influenced your current writing projects or changed the way you write? Do you think that you will revisit any of the characters or themes from this novel?**

*A Window Opens* has definitely changed the way I write insofar as it inspired me to write fiction for the first time since college—twenty years! It was fun to get back in the saddle. Much as I love these characters, I don’t think I’ll write about them again. I feel like they’ve said what they needed to say. and now I need to move on to other people—maybe ones who live in more exotic places than New Jersey so I can live vicariously. The themes in this novel are the themes of my life, so in that sense I think I will continue to write what I know.

**As a reader, who are some of the storytellers you find inspiring and why?**

Anna Quindlen, Ann Patchett, Anne Tyler—partly because my middle name is “Ann” and mostly because they tell it like it is. I’ll follow these three into any world they create. And fine, Lorrie Moore too, even if her name ruins my alliteration.

**You currently work as the books editor for *Glamour* magazine. As an editor, what do you keep an eye out for? Do your choices as an editor differ from what you would choose to read personally or do you find that your choices are closely aligned in both of these instances?**

I’m lucky that my reading choices align with the kinds of books we cover in *Glamour*: page-turning and thoughtful fiction, honest and brave memoirs, with the occasional creepy thriller or celebrity tell-all thrown in for good measure. I love stories that make me change my mind about something.

**What role do you think women’s magazines fulfill within contemporary book culture? What changes, additions, or improvements would you like to see in this area?**

I’d like to see more coverage of books in all magazines, not just ones for women. It seems to me that people are having a very hard time figuring out what to read. We’re short on bookstores, so it’s harder than it used to be to get a personal recommendation, and Amazon or bn.com still don’t really help us discover books we haven’t heard of before. So instead we see the crowdsourcing approach on Facebook and Twitter, which helps build these mega-bestsellers: *Gone Girl*, *The Goldfinch, All the Light We Cannot See.* Magazines can help spotlight other books, the ones we might not hear about otherwise. I’m as excited as the next reviewer about the “big” books, but I also like to have a chance to spotlight the unsung heroes.

**When Alice begins her job at Scroll, she gets to live out every booklover’s fantasy by picking out a first edition of any book of her choosing. If you had the same opportunity, what book would you choose and why?**

Like Alice, I would choose *A Room of One’s Own.* I love every word of the book and I love the memories of when I first read it. Of course, I’d cherish the first edition, but my marked up paperback from the college bookstore would always be top dog on the shelf.