

I Miss You When I Blink Book Club Discussion Guide

Introduction

Mary Laura Philpott thought she'd cracked the code: Always be right, and you'll always be happy.

But once she'd completed her life's to-do list (job, spouse, house, babies—check!), she found that instead of feeling content and successful, she felt anxious. Lost. Stuck in a daily grind of overflowing calendars, grueling small talk, and sprawling traffic. She'd done everything “right,” but she felt all wrong. What's the worse failure, she wondered: smiling and staying the course, or blowing it all up and running away? And are those the only options?

In this memoir-in-essays full of spot-on observations about home, work, and creative life, Philpott takes on the conflicting pressures of modern adulthood with wit and heart. She offers up her own stories to show that identity crises don't happen just once or only at midlife; reassures us that small, recurring personal re-inventions are both normal and necessary; and advises that if you're going to faint, you should get low to the ground first. Most of all, Philpott shows that when you stop feeling satisfied with your life, you don't have to burn it all down and set off on a transcontinental hike (unless you want to, of course). You can call upon your many selves to figure out who you are, who you're not, and where you belong. Who among us isn't trying to do that?

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. “It's the perfect sentence, but I didn't write it. My six-year-old did.” What did you initially think the phrase “I miss you when I blink” meant and what do you think of it after reading the book? Do you think it was a good choice of title for this collection?
2. “We all keep certain phrases handy in our minds—hanging on hooks just inside the door where we can grab them like a raincoat, for easy access. Not mantras exactly, but go-to choruses that state how things are, that give structure to the chaos and help life make a little more sense.” Do you have one of these? What is it and where did it come from?
3. “For so many people I know, there is no one big midlife smashup; there's a recurring sense of having met an impasse, a need to turn around and not only change course, but change the way you are.” Have you ever felt this way? How did you get yourself out of it?
4. Mary Laura mentions finding her brilliant college notes about Virginia Woolf and feeling detached from that person. Is there a version of yourself that you miss most?
5. Are you a perfectionist — or do you identify with any of Mary Laura's perfectionist tendencies?
6. Have you ever thought of your life as an endless to-do list? Mary Laura finds herself checking things off, getting to the end of her “successful adulthood” list, but feeling more disoriented than

ever, like she hasn't arrived anywhere. How can we remain goal-oriented without finding ourselves at this point?

7. "It wouldn't be fair for me to say, 'I'm just an average person,' or 'an ordinary' person, because I am also a lucky person. I was raised in a loving home and grew up to have another loving home, and I do not suffer from dire physical, financial, or situational disadvantages that so many people struggle under. But being fortunate doesn't mean you won't reach a certain point in life—many points actually—and panic." How can we recognize the privileges we have while still treating our own struggles and feelings with respect?

8. "All of us have one prevalent personality trait, no matter what other qualities we possess. There's always one ingredient that flavors everything else about us. The cilantro, if you will." Do you think this is true? And if so, what's yours?

9. Mary Laura writes about the trope of blaming your parents for your flaws: "So there you have it. When I was growing up, my mother was a hard-ass, and she turned me compulsive. It's all my mother's fault. Or: When I was growing up, my mother was my cheerleader, and she made me successful. It's all to my mother's credit." How do you view the effects your parents had on you? Is there another way to look at this?

10. "In school we're taught to do our best, but we're limited by the bounds of what we understand to be right—and 'right' looks different to everyone, apparently." Do people ever fully learn that lesson? How do you teach kids what's right and wrong while also teaching them that right and wrong look different to everyone?

11. Have you ever dated a person who was "totally wrong but really fun for a little while"?

12. Do you believe that the potential selves you could have been "exist as surely as my past selves do and as truly as the real, right-now self does, too"? How did reading that make you feel? Do you ever think about the alternate lives you might have lived?

13. Have you ever found yourself in a conversation about the weather or traffic and wondered, "Have conversations always been like this?" How do we get into conversational ruts (with our friends or our partners) — and how can we get out of them? What do you do to break through the small talk?

14. At the end of Mary Laura's solo retreat in Nashville, she writes in her journal, "I am too smart to go back to being miserable." Did that feeling strike a chord with you?

15. Mary Laura believes you can always start over. Do you believe the same? Have you started over in some small (or large) way as an adult? Or do you dream of making a big change one day?

What will your book club read next? Check out Mary Laura Philpott's Instagram (@marylauraphilpott), sign up for her newsletter, or read some of her recent articles. Then read another of the many books she recommends! (Or just follow along with the adventures of her dogs, Eleanor Roosevelt and Woodstock.)

Atria Books Asks, Mary Laura Philpott Answers: A Conversation

You tell this story in the book but it's such a great place to start—what did you notice working as a bookseller that made you realize a book like this was necessary?

I saw this happen more times than I could count: Someone walks into the bookstore — shadows under her eyes, keys in her hand like she has just a minute before she has to be somewhere else — and makes her way over to the nonfiction section. She starts pulling down memoirs and essay collections and reading a few pages of each. She might get chuckle or get a little teary, and her shoulders start to relax a bit. The books she's gravitating to are memoirs by people who have burned down their lives and started over, set off across the world with a backpack, left their friends and family behind to do something crazy/grand/hilarious/huge and become someone new. There's something in those books that strikes a chord with her.

But then she puts those books back.

She approaches a bookseller and says something like, "What do you have... kind of like these, but..." She means, "What do you have for me?" She means, "What do you have for the woman who longs to make some kind of change but isn't about to blow up her life? Where's the book I can relate to?" This person — all these people — need a book that tells their story and makes them feel seen.

I was well into writing this collection when it occurred to me: This could be that book.

Which version of yourself are you missing most right now?

If I could hop in a time machine every now and then, I'd go back and be college-me for a while. What a time. Living with all my friends? No responsibilities other than to read and learn? And I might also go back to the time when I had two little babies at home, but only if the time machine would bring me back to now, because good lord, that was exhausting. I don't miss any past version of me so much that I'd want to have it back forever. I love my 40s, partially because the lessons of my 20s and 30s are behind me, even if I do miss the version of my face that didn't have these bags under the eyes.

You open the book with lyrics by The Decemberists, "We know, we know, we belong to ya / We know you threw your arms around us / In hopes we wouldn't change / But we had to change some / You know, to belong to you" What made you choose that opening?

Oh, that song. I love it so much. Apparently it was written as if it's from the perspective of a boy-band singer who wants to change his music and do something new, but he feels stuck in his old image, held in place by fans' expectations. Forget that for a minute though, and just listen to the chorus. It's about longing to change your life while still holding onto your essential self and the people who matter to you most.

As someone who is "addicted to getting things right" and feels like "everything in life is a test" what was the process of writing an essay collection (a pretty subjective

endeavor!) like for you? What were some of the decisions you needed to let go of? How well did you trust yourself throughout the process?

One of the toughest parts of this process came when I had about a third of the collection finished. Somehow I got fixated on the idea that before I wrote the rest of it, I should be able to outline it, maybe even sell it as a proposal. But I couldn't picture exactly how the rest of the book would go, so I kept talking about it with people — like, "What do readers want in a book? What's the best way to plan this out?"

The problem was, when I listened to other people tell me what they thought the book should be, I'd then spin my wheels trying to fulfill their expectations. Creating something based on what you think other people want doesn't tend to produce great work, at least in my experience. I got stuck that way for a while, attempting to please people and earn approval for something I hadn't even fully written yet.

Finally, I took the advice of a fellow writer who told me to stop talking about it, quit trying to envision an outline, and just write what I wanted and needed to say. So I spent about a year and a half writing without a plan — not totally sure whether this growing pile of essays would come together into something coherent or not. It turned out I could trust myself so much better once I shut everyone else out, and in the end I had a solid book draft to work with.

What was the most challenging section of this book to write and why?

Honestly, the most challenging part was figuring out which order to put things in once they were written. I use drafting software called Scrivener, which makes it easy to move chapters or essays around, but ultimately I had to print the whole book on paper, cut it up with scissors, and move pieces around on the floor until the arc worked itself out. It's one thing to say, "Here are 30 things that happened to me." It's a whole other art form to be able to say, "Here are those 30 things arranged in a sequence that doesn't just tell a story about me, but illuminates something readers will find relatable and true about themselves."

In writing this book did you ever struggle with, as you put it, the "Shit, what right do I have to feel this way" thoughts? How did you overcome them once again and give your feelings the respect they deserve?

Constantly. I'd go through cycles where I'd think, "Oh, who even cares? Why am I writing this?" But occasionally one of these essays would be published individually somewhere, and every time that happened, I'd get gushing, heartfelt messages from readers saying, "YES, thank you for putting into words how I feel." That would remind me that this project was bigger than me and my own feelings.

(I also inevitably got messages like, "Shut up. You have no real problems." There's something bizarrely motivating about getting a comment like that from a stranger — like, oh, you think I should shut up? You want me to stop? WATCH THIS, BUDDY.)

What has surprised you most about readers' responses to this book? Is there a particular essay that has seemed to grab people the most?

I've been floored by the response. It actually took me a little off guard at the beginning, the degree to which people I'd never met felt comfortable sending letters and emails sharing their personal experiences as a way of showing how the book resonated with them. I've heard stories about people's childhoods, their career crises, their kids, their relationships... So far, the essays that get the most response are probably Wonder Woman, The Window, and A Letter to the Type A Person in Distress, but at this point, I think I've heard from readers on nearly all of them, which just amazes me. It's an honor to be entrusted with people's stories.

If people read this book and identify with feeling stuck in life, what would you tell them to do next?

I don't know if I'm in any position to give advice, but I guess I'd say, first of all, just know you're not alone. Everyone around you may look like they have their shit together, but I guarantee you most of them have some sort of chaos going on. So if you're dissatisfied or lost, you're in good company.

Then you might ask yourself, "Of all the commitments I have and things I'm doing, which things are absolutely necessary?" There's a difference between "I have to do this" and "Everyone expects me to do this." You don't have to do things just because you've been doing them or because you think someone might get mad if you don't. You can quit more than you might think. And once you quit things, you have room to do other things. People might balk at first, but then they'll move on to minding somebody else's business. Grant yourself permission to change.

You were a longtime bookseller, and you still host a show about books. When someone asks you, "What should I read next?" how do you go about answering that question?

First I ask, "What's the last book you read and loved?" Then I help them find some facet of that reading experience in another book. I like to get people to try something fresh and different, but with most people it's easier to do that if you start with some of the elements they already know they like. Baby steps toward trying new things!

Why do you think independent bookstores are so essential, and how can readers best support them?

Well, do you want to read something that hasn't been served to you by an algorithm? Want to browse? Want to admire beautiful rectangular objects, learn new things, crack yourself up, or take home whole fictional worlds that fit in your purse? That's what bookstores offer. They're cultural hubs for communities. (Libraries, too! Libraries are magical.)

The best way to support local stores is by shopping in local stores. Get your beach reading there. Buy gifts there. Meet your friends for coffee there. When you're posting about books on social media, link to the books you like on your local store's website, so people can click over and order them from there. If you don't do business with stores, they won't stay open. And then you're living in a place with no bookstore, and what fun is that?