

Reading Group Guide for *Bomb Shelter*
Discussion Prompts + Author Q&A
Created by Atria Books / Simon & Schuster

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think Mary Laura Philpott chose the essay “Shadows” to open her memoir? What themes in this piece echo throughout the rest of the book?

2. Mary Laura says that after her daughter was born, “Keeping her alive made me feel alive.” (13) Have you ever experienced an act of caretaking that made you feel more alive?

3. Mary Laura tends to move forward and backward through time in her storytelling. How does that movement through time give you more insight into her present-day concerns?

4. While Mary Laura tackles some very serious topics here, she also balances the mood often by striking a lighter tone and incorporating some more humorous stories. What were some of the lines that made you laugh, and how did the blend of drama and comedy affect your reading experience?

5. The subtitle of this memoir is “Love, Time, and Other Explosives.” What makes love and time so “explosive”? Where did you spot metaphorical “explosives” throughout the book?

6. The Philpott household has had an eclectic menagerie of animals over the years — from Frank the turtle, to dogs Woodstock and Eleanor Roosevelt, to an ill-fated pair of African dwarf water frogs. What elements of Mary Laura’s writing ensure the animals have as much personality on the page as the humans?

7. Mary Laura tells us she was never a cheerleader (except for a two-week period in ninth grade) but she tries “to cheer for all sorts of things: books, art, animals, underdogs, people trying to figure themselves out, people toiling away at unglamorous work purely because they care and want to make a difference. (Go, scientists!) Few things cheer me up as much as giving a pep talk that cheers up someone else.” (85) Where in this memoir do you see Mary Laura acting as a cheerleader? Are there moments in this book that feel like pep talks? And do you also feel energized by cheering on others?

8. “A hardening happens to our souls when we come to accept terrible things as normal,” Mary Laura writes. “Sometimes I wonder if I’m such a worrier because the tough outer shell around the softness of my soul never hardened all the way up.” (143) In what ways does she reveal the softness of her soul in this book?

9. In “Spatchcock This,” Mary Laura attempts to follow her mother’s beloved holiday recipes, which don’t turn out quite as they should. She says she tackled the overambitious culinary challenge “too late, that was the problem, but at least I tried.” (218) Where else in these stories does Mary Laura try something, but not get it quite right? In what ways does the effort she puts into things sometimes mean more than the outcome?

10. As she realizes her oldest child has nearly reached adulthood, Mary Laura writes that she considers herself a “still-growing child” and she, too, is “becoming someone, still and always.” (246) Do you identify with this concept? In what ways do you see Mary Laura constantly growing throughout these stories she tells?

11. In the final essay, “Stay,” Mary Laura defines herself as a person who loves birthdays, but says she understands why birthdays make some people sad. How does your birthday make you feel? Why?

12. What was your mood as you turned the final page of *Bomb Shelter*? And how did this book change something about how you look at your own life?

Enhance Your Book Club with Further Reading

1. *Bomb Shelter* is a memoir written in essays. Mary Laura Philpott has been compared to classic essayists like Nora Ephron and Laurie Colwin. Choose one of their essay collections, like Ephron's *I Feel Bad About My Neck* or Colwin's *Home Cooking*, and compare it to *Bomb Shelter*. What similarities and differences do you see?

A Conversation with Mary Laura Philpott

Q: It seems like writing so intimately about your family could be challenging. Were there stories you worried about including? How did you decide you did indeed want to tell them?

A: Boundaries were *extremely* important to me in writing *Bomb Shelter*. From the outset — and repeatedly throughout the writing process — I checked in with myself to make sure that what I was writing was my story, not a story about anyone else. What I mean is, I knew I had the perspective right as long as I could define what I was writing by saying, “This is a story about a woman who...” and not “This is a story about a boy who... (or a girl who... or a man who... or a family who...)” If I kept that perspective right, then the boundaries would be obvious. You don’t need to know much at all about my family members for me to tell you a story about my evolution as a human being and as an anxious optimist. I need to tell only the pieces of their lives that overlap with these key pieces of my own life, and even in telling those pieces, I can protect their privacy in a variety of ways.

I was especially concerned with protecting privacy where my children were involved. I don’t use my their names, for instance. They also read and weighed in

on every word of this book. It helps, too, that one of them is legally an adult and the other isn't far behind... I do feel they're old enough to give meaningful consent to being included in their mother's memoir.

Q: You have some incredible essay titles that jump off the page—"Turtles, Turtles, Turtles," "Do You Hear the People Sing?," "The Six Stages of Finding Out You Have High Cholesterol," "Spatchcock This"—how do you come up with such memorable titles?

A: Oh, thank you! Coming up with titles — whether for books or individual essays/chapters — is one of the most enjoyable parts of the process for me. I absolutely love it when writer friends ask me for help brainstorming book titles! It's really fun to find that one little phrase from a larger piece that can represent the whole thing in a way that's intriguing but not totally baffling — something that piques curiosity and also just sounds good in the ear. That's the winning combination.

Q: Was there a story you most wanted to tell? How do readers seem to respond to it?

A: So many stories I've been wanting to tell came together in this book. It was practically knitting itself together in my head every waking (and sleeping!) moment for a couple of years. I've been carrying around the story in "Worst Case Scenario" — about being a second grader and hearing of the kidnapping of an older girl who lived near me — for so long. I knew I wanted to tell the story in the title chapter, "Bomb Shelter," too, because learning about my dad's secret job illuminated so much about love and risk and our protective instincts. And then all these smaller stories that might on the surface seem unrelated — the dog who wouldn't eat, my friend who died, those strange snippets of stories I heard from my parents when I was little — they all bubbled up from my memory and demanded to be included in this book.

And, of course, I knew that to tell the story of being a mother and learning to let go of my children as they leave the nest, I would need to explain what heightened the stakes in that otherwise ordinary phase of life: the sudden turn in my son's health. I knew that scene had to come early in the book, because it's what kicked my worry into a whole new gear and set a clock ticking in my head. I probably spent more time on that chapter — "Hurry, Hurry" — than any of the others, because I really wanted to honor its importance.

Q: Do you have a favorite memoir or essay collection written by another writer? Did it influence your work on *Bomb Shelter* at all?

A: Oh my goodness, I couldn't even begin to make a whole list of my favorites here — it would go on for pages! I've always loved the geniuses who manage to trick you into thinking you're getting comedy while they slyly stab you right in the heart with something poignant and meaningful: David Sedaris, Nora Ephron, etc. But this time around, because this book goes a little deeper and darker in terms of mood and tone than what I've written before, I also found myself considering some of my favorite books about the thin line between life and death. Maggie O'Farrell's memoir-in-essays *I Am, I Am, I Am* came to mind often, as did Joan Didion's shimmering jewel of a memoir, *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

Q: In "To the Screaming Woman on the Quad," you have a profound realization: "What a great gift it would be to grant one another the grace of accepting who we've turned into, the self we fought to be" (96). Do you have any advice to readers struggling to grant others—or themselves—the grace of accepting who people have turned into?

A: Go to therapy! I'm not kidding. This is something I'm working on with my own therapist: letting go of my tendency to comb through every mistake I've ever made and attribute every bad thing that happens to some failure on my own part. We all have bad years, bad days, and bad moments, but the only moment within our control is the one we're living right now. The more I accept this about

myself, the more I extend the same grace to other people. (I also think that kind of acceptance comes with age. I'm far less judgmental now than I used to be. Life is hard. Most people are trying their best.)

Q: In the same essay, you discuss how you dislike the saying “when someone shows you who they are, believe them” because “we all exist to one another as snippets of witnessed behavior” (95), and what if you simply witnessed someone on their very worst day? Considering that we are reading your memoir — effectively witnessing snippets from your life — did you ever feel worried that readers would judge you unfairly? How do you balance telling your stories with knowing that readers may misunderstand you?

A: What a brilliant question! I know this happens with memoir: People think they know the whole person behind the book just because they know the parts of the person that are *in* the book. The fact is that the me-character in my books is not the same as me, the human being. Every reader will conjure a different me-character, because their mind will take the pieces I've shown them and then string those together, make some assumptions, and fill in gaps to create a whole person-shaped image. Their own life experiences inform how they flesh out that character. So that imagined person has a lot in common with me, but she's not *me*.

There's so much of my life that isn't in my books — even within a particular story, so many parts that don't make it onto the page. I might write about something I did and give two reasons I did it, but leave out the third reason because it would distract from the point I'm making and/or it overlaps with someone else's life and I'm respecting their privacy. So a reader might evaluate that scene and decide, “That was the right thing to do” or “Oh, I hate that she did that.” It's a fair judgment of the me-character in the story as written, but it is not — it can't be — an informed judgment of me, the actual person.

It's weird, and perhaps a bit unsettling if I think about it too much. But it's also beside the point of why I write. I don't write books to make strangers understand me. When I write a book, I'm taking a small group of scenes from my

whole life, assembling them in a certain order to create a particular emotional arc or “plot,” all for the purpose of telling a story about what it means to be human.

Q: You wrote much of *Bomb Shelter* during the pandemic. Was a pandemic something past-you ever worried about, alongside other worries such as volcanic eruptions and someone eating your pet? What have you done to try to stay your cheerful self in an anxiety-inducing time?

A: It’s funny. I’m married to a very pragmatic person whose mind doesn’t spin out into infinite worrisome scenarios like mine does. But he’s been saying for years, in a matter-of-fact way, “You know, humanity really is due for a pandemic at some point soon.” So when it happened, as strange and surreal as it was, it also seemed like, well, here’s something the most reasonable person I know has been talking about for quite some time, so... OK, I guess this was to be expected.

My sense of good cheer comes and goes. It’s extremely resilient. It does take hits now and then; I’m prone to anxiety (obviously) — and depression as well — not to mention the chaos of the world we live in. But if I wait things out, my optimism tends to rise back up to the surface. I always feel better when I’m getting outside a lot, changing my scenery, and spending time with friends or my sweet family. Funny television shows have been a godsend lately, too. Lord bless *Ted Lasso*.

Q: Can you give an update on your pets, please? How are Frank, Woodstock, and Eleanor Roosevelt these days?

A: The dogs are great. They are getting older, which is actually nice, because they’re mellowing out a bit. At the moment I’m typing this, Frank is still wherever he goes in winter (under some leaves somewhere?). We don’t really know, because he’s wild, not a pet. But last I saw him, he looked good — spry and curious and very friendly, as usual.

Q: As a former bookseller, did you take solace in books when you were going through some of the difficult moments you describe in your memoir? Or is reading difficult for you when you're anxious?

A: During the toughest parts depicted in this book, I'm afraid most of my reading was on the internet. I'm a nervous Googler, which is not a state of being I recommend. You can find proof of your every worst fear online.

I have a hard time taking in book-length stories when I'm extremely anxious; I think subconsciously that might be why I gravitate to writing memoirs built out of essays. I know there may be readers out there who are like me, who need to be able to pick a book up and put it down and take it in small pieces, as they're able.

Q: What do you hope readers take away from *Bomb Shelter*?

A: For readers who are also anxious optimists, I hope they feel understood. For those who aren't, well, maybe they'll better understand someone else in their lives. But either way, I hope all readers feel a moment of human connection while engaged with this book. I hope it puts words to some of the questions and as-yet-unarticulated thoughts in their own minds.

And for everyone who has grown weary of all this trying, trying, trying in a world where everything keeps falling apart, I hope this book reminds them that there are so many reasons to keep going. Maybe they'll be inspired to call someone or do something for somebody else. Maybe they'll celebrate their birthdays more. Maybe they'll feel reassured that all their small acts of caretaking really do matter, because taking care of one another and the world around us is how we give life meaning.