

The Altar of Innocence

Ann Bracken

Reading Group

Topics and Questions for Discussion

1. It takes a certain amount of courage to share family and personal history. Discuss how effective you feel Ann has been at evoking empathy and compassion while providing a rare view into the family impacts of depression and alcoholism. What insight have you gained from reading this memoir?
2. Discuss Ann's mother, Helen. What do her depression and alcoholism say about her ability to raise her children? Do you feel any empathy for her? Do you feel her life might have been different had she been born later, and been able to make other choices? How so? ["The Altar of Innocence" (p. 10), "Wine and Water" (p. 19), "Swimming Pool Ladies" (p. 26), "When Medals are Useless" (p. 29), "The Same" (p. 31)]
3. At the heart of this memoir are the themes of secrets, loss, and silence. How do these themes intertwine to reinforce each other, especially through the generations? ["Postpartum" (p. 5), "The Pediatrician" (p. 11), "Nested" (p. 17) "Notes on the Table" (p. 45)]
4. The stigmas associated with mental illness and alcoholism had a profound impact on Ann's family life. To a large degree, these stigmas still exist today. What are your opinions on how we as a society might eradicate the stigmas and help those struggling to flourish? ["Helen Prays to Mary Queen of Heaven" (p. 6), "Three Days, Three Nights" (p. 27), "Day Treatment" (p. 60)]
5. Read "Perspective" (p. 37), which reflects on Helen at play, and compare it to "Afternoon Resolve" (p. 56, which depicts Ann's struggles to play with her children, despite her depression. How are these two situations similar? Different? Discuss your reactions to the dichotomy.
6. Discuss the evolution of sex throughout Ann's life? ["Confessions at 16" (p. 16), "Almost Athens" (p.47), "Kite without a String" (p. 52), "Even Now" (p. 69)]
7. Helen gave up her dreams of becoming a fashion designer to become instead a wife and mother. Ann discovered Helen's art and honored her mother's talent with a private art show. Describe your feelings about this loss and subsequent gift. Has this caused you to examine your own parents in a different light? ["Helen's Choice" (p. 3), "Design" (p. 39)]
8. Ann shows us the modern treatment protocol for depression, and how it didn't work for her. Her voice silenced due to the perception that she was mentally ill, she battled to regain her health. Discuss the notion that labeling may impede improvement. How might we need to modify or change health systems to ensure patients have a voice? ["Advice" (p. 59), "Day Treatment" (p. 60), "The Shock Machine" (p. 62), "The

Hopkins Doctor Diagnoses Me" (p. 65), "My Friends Insist That I'm Overmedicated" (p. 67), "The Energy Healer (p. 71)]

9. Childhood innocence is ever-present in the beginning of this memoir, despite the challenging circumstances of Ann's upbringing. Reflect on how reading these poems called up your own childhood memories. ["The Altar of Innocence" (p. 10), "Mirror, Mirror" (p. 15), "Love Is" (p. 20), "Adultery" (p. 24)]
10. Discuss how Ann's upbringing, early responsibility, and her own depression impacted her marriage. What are your thoughts about Ann subconsciously subjugated herself as her mother had done given how unhappy Ann was in the marriage. ["Kite Without a String" (p. 52), "My Husband Tells Me How He Feels" (p. 53), "What Lies Beneath" (p. 74), "The Portal" (p. 76), "Repurposed" (p. 77)]
11. Poet and author Laura Shovan wrote about *The Altar of Innocence*, "Readers will find hope in her journey." Discuss the emotions you experienced reading this memoir, and how you're left feeling at its conclusion.