

Book Club Questions for More Than Matzoh Balls

Major Themes

1. After reading this memoir, how has your understanding of Jewish-American identity changed, if at all?
2. Did the book prompt you to think differently about your own family's stories—what's been told and what's been kept silent?
3. Is there a tradition from the book (for example, Nana's open kitchen, Shabbos candles, Passover seders, baby namings, bar/bat mitzvahs, family walks) that you wish you had in your own life—or are glad you do have?
4. What, if anything, are you taking away from this book that might influence how you live, parent, grandparent, or participate in community?

Religion, Faith and Belief

1. The book presents four very different relationships to God: David's belief and connection to prayer in synagogue; Linda's Dad's "I guess I have to say no;" Linda's Mom's private nightly prayers; and Gary's comfort in participating in Hebrew liturgy even when the meaning isn't fully clear. Which perspective did you most identify with, and why?
2. How do Nana's Shabbos candles and Christmas lights coexist in your mind? What does that reveal about American assimilation, improvisation, and boundaries?
3. There's a turning point after 9/11, when the author walks into synagogue and feels a "coldness," seeing religious identity as drawing lines between "us" and "them." How does that relate to your own feelings about organized religion, especially in moments of political or sectarian conflict?
4. The book explores different ways of being Jewish: faith in God, participation in Jewish ritual, and Jewish cultural/ethical identity. How does the book distinguish these different ways of being Jewish? Where do you think Linda ultimately lands in terms of how she defines her own Judaism by the end of the book?



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American Identity, Politics, and Justice

1. In Chapter 3, the author describes watching *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* at age eight and then seeing Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the '68 Olympics as formative. What are some formative events in your own life that shaped your political attitudes?
2. The school desegregation/busing conflict and Linda being “literally the only student” in some classes during the boycott is a powerful vignette (chapter 6). Did you agree with her and her mother’s stance? How did you feel about the cost to her friendship?
3. Throughout the book, Linda wrestles with being proud of America and critical of it—from Revolution mythology, to Vietnam protests, to 9/11, to Christian nationalism. How does her view of America evolve, and where do you think she lands?

Marriage, Class, and In-Law Dynamics

1. Much of the book is about merging two very different Jewish families: one more assimilated, the other observant Holocaust survivors. Which moments capture those tensions most vividly for you (the cheesecake at the Baksts, bridesmaid-dress shopping, kashrut decisions, cash for tuition, etc.)? Were you surprised by the scope of differences between the two families, despite the many surface similarities?
2. How did you respond to the scenes of Paula as a young mother and homemaker—her precision, frugality, and anxiety—once you knew what she had lived through as a child? Did your feelings about her change over the course of the book?
3. What do you think enabled Linda and Gary to sustain their bond through medical school, stretches of maintaining a long-distance relationship, role changes, and differing views on religion and violence?

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Linda Brady Bakst". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.

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Parenting, Transmission, and the Next Generation

1. Linda and Gary commit to weekly Shabbat services for seven years so their kids will be “at home” in a synagogue, even though it’s not always meaningful to Linda. How do you feel about that commitment? How do you balance giving children a tradition with letting them choose their path?
2. What did you make of the “December dilemma” surrounding Santa at the daycare (chapter 32)? Do you think Linda’s approach was effective, idealistic, or futile? How would you have handled it?
3. The fight in high school when Daniel hits a classmate over a Holocaust joke brings out different responses from Linda and Gary. Whose perspective did you find more compelling—nonviolence and process, or the need to fight back? What do you think is the best response?

Grief, Illness, and Aging

1. How did the descriptions of Linda’s Dad’s illness and slow decline affect you—especially juxtaposed with earlier portraits of him as strong, athletic, and morally sure? Did anything in those chapters echo experiences you’ve had with illness or caregiving?
2. Linda’s mantra during her father’s decline is “strength, wisdom, mercy.” Did that phrase resonate for you—as a kind of secular prayer, a coping mechanism, something else?
3. Consider the deaths in the book: Nana’s sudden stroke, Grandma’s death, David’s long life ending soon after Leah’s wedding. How does the author’s way of writing about death evolve from childhood to later life? Does this resonate with any ways your own perspective on death has changed over time?



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Israel, Antisemitism, and Today

1. After visiting Israel, Linda writes that she remains a Zionist but feels more like a tourist than a returning native. Did this tension between emotional/political support and personal connection resonate with you?
2. The book was written in the shadow of rising antisemitism and ongoing, active conflict in Israel/Palestine. How do the family's Holocaust stories shape Linda's and Gary's reactions to more recent threats and events?
3. Late in the book, the author notes that friends now quietly discuss "where it might be safe to go" if things worsen in America. How did that line land for you? Does it feel hyperbolic, realistic, familiar?

Craft, Structure, and Voice

1. How did the interweaving of personal memoir with historical narrative (Paula's and David's stories, Leo's letter, Partisan history, etc.) affect your reading? Did you think this was effective as a narrative device?
2. What did you think of the use of specific, vivid scenes (the Sweet 16 party, the Godfather seder, the ketubah panic, the bridesmaid-dress tears, etc.) to illuminate bigger themes like Linda's insecurities, the role of family, the tension with in-laws?
3. If you could ask the author one question about her choices in telling this story—what she left in, what she left out—what would you ask?



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