

Reading Group Guide questions

1. “It’s normal for lives to drift apart; April expected it. Even back then, when she and Oliver used to take Buddy down to the creek to catch frogs and let them go, April understood it wouldn’t be forever” (page 18). Do you agree that it’s “normal” for lives to drift apart? Why might April have had such mature insight at a young age? What is the effect of April and Oliver spending so much time together after five years apart?
2. Why did young Oliver give up the piano and the Juilliard scholarship? How would his life have been different if he hadn’t made that decision, and what would April have done in his position?
3. When they were young and again when they reunite, Oliver has helped and protected April. Why does he continue with what seems to be a futile task? Is April thankful for his presence, resentful, or neither? What would you do in Oliver’s position? April’s?
4. “Sometimes a lie is more like the truth,” Nana says. “The truth isn’t always the way it happens” (page 70). What could she be referring to here? What other situations might this statement apply to?
5. April believes, “But she could never defile Oliver. He was too good. Too pure” (page 83). Why does she have such an exalted opinion of Oliver? Does he have similar feelings about her? Why or why not?
6. During an argument, Oliver experiences an instant in which “he understands how men can do her harm.” He then muses, “Wouldn’t she love it if he struck her? Wouldn’t it confirm everything she believes?” (page 90). Is there any truth to his thoughts, or are they merely the result of his anger? If he’s right, why would April invite such abuse?

7. When April recalls her own mistakes, she realizes they don't matter because "...it's too late for her. It's always been too late" (page 101). Is it really "too late" for her to make different decisions? Is it ever too late for anyone to do so? What would Oliver say to this, and how would April respond to him?
8. April thinks about her relationship with T.J.: "What she felt was not so much love as relief, because finally someone appeared who was willing to be her rudder. Yes, that was it. She was far better at reacting to situations than creating them" (page 112). Does April fit the passive bill she's given herself? Why does T.J. provide her with something that Oliver cannot?
9. "By the age of seventeen, [April] had already determined that sex was just something to get through" (page 158). What function does sex have for April, if not pleasure? For Oliver?
10. "What Oliver doesn't understand is that [April] doesn't fear T.J. because he can't hurt her. Only Oliver can do that...It hurts not because she is a failure, but because he finally sees so" (pages 182-3). Discuss how April and Oliver hurt one another. Why do no other slights or physical attacks affect either of them as powerfully as they wound one another?
11. Why did Oliver's mother give her journal to April?
12. Why does Oliver thinking his mother had an affair with April's father lead him to want to sleep with April?
13. Compare Oliver to his brother Al. Why are their relationships to April so different?
14. In describing the symphony movement that he matches to April, Oliver describes, "It's moving, exhilarating, transcendent. The harmony is always changing but the rhythm never does. It unfolds subtly, hypnotically, like a trance. It gives you a sense of

something that was already there, like the recognition of something you always knew. It extinguishes time. It doesn't matter what came before or what will come later; each note holds everything. The music unfurls in a necessary way, like the roll of the tide. It opens and lifts you away with it" (page 272). April disagrees, but is this an apt description of her? What does it reveal about Oliver's feelings about April?

15. Why does Oliver confront Quincy the night before his wedding, and then April during it? Is he willfully sabotaging his own marriage, is there truly a need for him to clear these old issues up immediately, or is it something else?
16. Will April and Oliver ever finally get together?

Author Q&A

- 1. So much of the relationship between April and Oliver is based on them simultaneously knowing one another better than anyone else knows them and not knowing so much about the details of one another's lives and choices. Was it difficult to strike this balance between knowing and not knowing?**

With each new draft of *April & Oliver*, I lengthened the years of estrangement between them in order to sharpen the edge between knowing and not knowing. Factual knowledge of someone's life is not equivalent to understanding. For instance, we may feel misunderstood by a parent who knows the details of our lives, yet understood by a friend who doesn't. On the surface, Bernadette knows Oliver better than April does, but April grasps something less tangible about him. According to Oliver, April is impossible to understand, yet he is sure he

knows her better than she knows herself. I've never been able to unravel the mystery of simultaneously knowing and not knowing another person; I guess that's why I write about it.

- 2. April's grandmother Nana is such an important character in this story. She clearly wants April and Oliver to get together, and she is particularly tough on April, who Nana views as somewhat mixed-up. She is mostly dismissed by her fellow characters, but she often voices what the reader is thinking. What was your experience in writing this character who was a sort of beacon of lucidity in the midst of so much turmoil?**

In my experience, moments of lucidity often arise from the margins. My day may be populated with so-called important markers – appointments, faculty meetings, etc., - but the little beams of light usually slip in at the edges – a story told by my daughter, a hummingbird spotted by my son, or an exchange with a stranger at the gas station. In her old age, Nana is outside the constant stream of *do-do-do* that devours those of us in our “productive” years. She is allowed to simply be, which affords her clarity of mind, even though she is often perceived as senile. April focuses on her job, her relationships, and the books she reads, when all the while Nana is telling her everything she needs to know. *April & Oliver* was hard to write in places, but the scenes with Nana always felt reassuring.

- 3. Oliver considers April is family, but she strongly disagrees. “She and Oliver aren't even from the same planet” (page 123). Romantic love and familial love**

are huge topics; what led you to tie the two together with these characters that are both related/not related and in love/unable to admit it?

Familial love and romantic love have more in common than we think. Both can be burdened and obscured by projection. Parents pin their own lost hopes on their children. Children project their own shortcomings on their parents. Siblings dislike in one another the very traits they themselves possess. Romantic love is not so different. We project onto the beloved the parts of ourselves from which we have become disconnected. For Oliver, it's his musical sensibility and daringness. April becomes irresistible to him because she symbolizes this lost part of him. Similarly, Oliver represents April's undeveloped qualities, the part of her that can plan, take charge, and use logic to bring order to her life. Oliver and April have the double whammy of pseudo-familial ties and romantic interest, making it nearly impossible to ever see each other clearly. Yet, in occasional moments of grace, they do.

4. On a similar note, do you think it was reasonable for Bernadette to demand that Oliver not spend time alone with April? On one hand, she is incredibly patient with both Oliver and April, but on the other hand, this seems like a move fueled by her jealousy finally getting the better of her. Do you believe that there was anything she could have done to keep Oliver?

Would it have helped if Bernadette forbade Oliver to see April from the outset? Or not forbade him later? Or postponed the wedding until he sorted things out? It's doubtful. It isn't

really Oliver's attraction to April that Bernadette is up against; it is his overwhelming desire to regain his soul, no matter how misguided the means.

- 5. It almost seems as though Oliver and Bernadette might have had a perfectly happy marriage if Oliver had never reencountered April. Do you think April was instrumental in their breakup, or was she merely a catalyst for what has inevitable? Would you say that certain couples are "destined" to either come together or break apart?**

Is April the catalyst for the breakup? Yes, but one that Oliver manifests.

Oddly enough, he needs a catastrophe. Law student, Eagle Scout and piano prodigy, he consistently fulfills expectations. But somewhere along the way he has lost a sensibility that was essential to him, and which manifested itself in his music. That sensibility was a door inviting his passage. But he was afraid. Surrender to beauty, musical or otherwise, can seem like a kind of self-annihilation; so much is relinquished. But in fact it amounts to a recovery of oneself. Yes, Oliver might have married Bernadette and been happy, so to speak, but sooner or later the door would reappear. It might take the form of his music, if he has not waited too long, or illness, or a relationship, but whatever the manifestation, his surrender would still be required. The Jonah image near the end of the book is not accidental. Oliver can return to himself willingly, or not. Would he have been happily married to Bernadette? Yes, happy in their shared denial that anything was wrong with his life.

6. April has dealt with so many serious issues—absent parents, sexual abuse, physical violence, and others. How did you enter the mindset of someone who had suffered so much, yet was still highly functional? Was it a task to go between the extremes of April’s obvious pain and the more subtle setbacks endured by Oliver?

I’ve known people who have suffered unspeakable things, yet possess remarkable buoyancy, and others whose lives appear very privileged, yet suffer a great deal of mental anguish. Pain is impossible to measure. It seems as though April has been dealt a bad hand in life and Oliver a lucky one, but in truth they are not so different. Both suffer. Both entrench themselves in patterns and cycles that numb their pain. In some ways, he is more lost than she is. But they offer each other a gift, not the fulfillment of each other’s needs, which of course no one can give, but rather the simple act of being present to one another. That’s the power of their relationship.

7. Do you think April and Oliver will ever finally get together?

I am the kind of writer who writes from the pen, not from the brain. Until a scene is written, I can’t say what will happen in it. In an odd way, whether or not Oliver and April find each other again in the future is not up to me, it’s up to them. Like everyone else, I can only wonder.