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# AS CLOSE TO US AS BREATHING

ELIZABETH POLINER

"A bighearted roundelay of a novel that performs the invaluable service of recovering a lost world." —*New York Times Book Review*

## Discussion questions for Elizabeth Poliner's AS CLOSE TO US AS BREATHING

1. What did you make of Poliner's choice to have Molly narrate the novel? How did her point of view add to your understanding of the Leibritsky family?
2. On page 286 (after Nina has received stitches on her forehead), Molly states: "That's when I sensed something I hadn't before: that I needed [my family members], that I couldn't be me, the person only I spoke to, a quiet patter in my head . . . I couldn't be me, *her*, without them." How does Molly's narration of the novel reflect this sense of identity as both personal and relational? How does that theme play out in the lives of other characters in the book?

3. Atonement is a recurring theme of the novel. Discuss the ways the different characters atone, and what each seem to be atoning for. After Davy's death, do any of the characters feel entitled to happiness?
4. Discuss the ways that the past seems to continually inform the present throughout the novel. What, if anything, do we inherit, both from our families and from our history?
5. While Judaism is clearly very important to the Leibritsky family, religion doesn't seem to mean the same thing to each member of the family. How do the different characters interact with and internalize their faith? How does religion, including the social system that comprises the religion, support and/or undermine the different members of the Leibritsky family? Discuss the role that ritual and tradition plays throughout the novel.
6. Many members of the Leibritsky clan seem to be pulled by competing ties—to themselves as individuals, and to their sense of belonging to a group, whether that be the family group or the religious group. Discuss how this plays out with different characters.
7. Did you relate to or sympathize with one sister over the others? If so, which one?
8. At one point in the novel, Molly says of Bec, "The thing about family, she knew, was that you were either in or you were out." How does this sentiment play out in other ways for the Leibritsky family? For the most part, they are part of a very insular community. How does this help and hinder various characters throughout the novel?
9. The setting of the Milford coastline in 1948 consists of boroughs that are divided up by ethnicity. In what ways does the novel incorporate the idea of boundaries, whether geographic or interpersonal?
10. Early in the novel Bec tells Molly, "You have to be yourself. You have to. Or something in you dies." In what ways does the social and religious world of the Leibritskys in 1948 allow or inhibit the characters to be themselves? In what ways do the characters, especially after the accident, allow or inhibit their own personal freedom?
11. The word "freedom" appears several times in the first third of the book. For example, "I'm free!" Davy cried while jumping on his bed upon arriving at Woodmont for the summer. From the perspective of fifty years later, Molly states: "Here's what I sense: that at the summer's start Davy's words were true for each of us, though not for the same reason, and that all of this—the different ways we found and grabbed at our freedom—had so much to do, ultimately, with this boy's death." What does Molly mean by this statement? Do you agree?
12. Are the limitations and avenues to "freedom" for the characters in the novel similar to limitations and avenues in other cultures? Is this story, in some way, universal?

13. As a child in Russia, Molly's grandfather Maks Syrkin experienced the violence and dislocation of pogroms against Jews. He also experienced, at a young age, the death of his father. How does he try to make life in America safe for his family? In what ways is the story of the Syrkin and Leibritsky clans typical of immigrants generally? How does Davy's death impact their journey toward the "American Dream"?
14. The Leibritsky's cousin Reuben in Israel, a Holocaust survivor, suffers from being a displaced person. Late in the novel, Molly uses that phrase to describe herself and Bec when she states: "We arrived at the unmarked territory of our adult female lives not as pioneers but, like our cousin Reuben and all the Jews pouring into Israel after the war—or like the rest of my family, forever unmoored by the events of 1948—as displaced persons, as refugees." What does Molly mean by this statement with regard to herself and Bec, and with regard to her family generally?