

## **HABEN READING GROUP GUIDE**

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Haben spent an extraordinary amount of time considering every detail when writing this book, including which tense to use. In the introduction she explains that “unlike most memoirs, the stories here unfold in the present tense.” How did this style choice affect how you experienced the book?
2. Haben details her efforts to resist gendered chores like cooking, culminating in that unforgettable meat chopping scene. What would you have done if someone had played such a prank on you? Have you ever resisted doing gendered activities? Share with the group.
3. Memoirs capture experiences from a person’s life that fall under a unifying theme. At the end of this book you may have wondered why Haben did not dive into the topics of dating, marriage, or babies. That’s not the subject of this book. Still, some readers expressed disappointment. Should publishers require all women writing memoirs to discuss dating, marriage, and childbearing? How can we create a future in which women who write memoirs are not criticized for failing to cover traditionally “feminine” topics? Discuss.
4. While she discusses many serious topics and events, Haben’s memoir is notably lighthearted and funny. What was your favorite humorous moment in the book? How does a sense of humor aid someone who is experiencing adversity? What are some of the difficult moments in your life that were eased by laughter? Share with the group.
5. Several chapters take place in Eritrea and Mali. Haben does not feel an immediate sense of belonging in these places because her disability and American background mark her as different. How does Haben strive to connect with the people around her? How effective are those strategies? Have you spent time in a community where you did not feel you belonged? What strategies did you use to build connection?

6. When Haben meets Justin at the college cafeteria, she doesn't know his race. Several conversations in, the topic of race comes up and she asks him how he identifies. How does blindness change how a person navigates a racial society? How would your world change if you only learned someone's race after an hour of conversation with them?
7. Haben experiences a surprising number of adventures in her young life. "I prefer dancing to watching others dance." If Haben were sighted, do you think she would spend more time watching instead of dancing? What drives her to experience so much in the world? How has Haben changed your perspective and your relationship to the world around you? What are you inspired to try doing? Share with the group.
8. "The dominant culture promotes ableism, the idea that people with disabilities are inferior to the nondisabled. Assumptions like: disability is a tragedy; disabled people are unteachable; it's better to be dead than disabled." During the COVID-19 pandemic, several health experts proposed denying medical treatment to disabled people at hospitals unable to treat all their patients due to scarce resources. Should hospitals prioritize providing care for nondisabled people over disabled people? Discuss your thoughts with the group.
9. "Ableism runs so deep in our society that most ableists don't recognize their actions as ableist. They coat ableism in sweetness, then expect applause for their 'good' deeds. Attempts to explain the ableism behind the 'good deeds' get brushed aside as sensitive, angry, and ungrateful." When did you learn about ableism for the first time, and how did you feel? Can you think of a time when you or someone you know unintentionally did something ableist? Describe what happened. The next time you witness ableism, what will you do? What's the best way to teach someone about ableism?
10. A potential employer at a Harvard networking event repeatedly calls Haben inspiring. Despite claiming she inspired him, Simon does not invite Haben to apply for a position at his law firm. What does the word "inspiring" mean in this context? "The overuse of

the word, especially for the most trivial things, has dulled its meaning. People sometimes even use the word as a disguise for pity. For example, ‘You inspire me to stop complaining about my problems because I should feel grateful I don’t have yours.’” When do you think it would be okay to call a disabled person inspiring? How do you move beyond the “inspiration cliché”? Discuss.

11. Society repeatedly tells us that a disabled person who wants to become successful must overcome their disability. Haben makes a point of reminding readers at the end of the book, after describing all her success, that she is still Deafblind. Throughout this book disability is never an obstacle to overcome. What are the actual obstacles Haben overcomes? What are some examples from your life when people wrongly assumed you couldn’t do something? What was the real obstacle in each situation?
  
12. After learning to advocate for herself, Haben now uses her skills and talents to increase opportunities and dismantle barriers facing disabled people. She strongly believes that we all have the power to create positive change. What are some of the barriers in your community? Choose one of these barriers and develop a plan to remove it. Share your plan with the group and support each other in making your community more accessible.