

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SANDRA  
BROWN

A NOVEL

OVERKILL

ENHANCED READING  
GROUP GUIDE

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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- 1.** After their marriage ended, Zach couldn't believe he'd ever pledged his everlasting love, honor, and fidelity to Rebecca. Have you ever had a relationship—romantic or otherwise—that made you question your own judgment? How did you work through those feelings?
- 2.** Despite their split, Zach and Rebecca were rarely mentioned in the media without the other. Zach despised this, calling it “the price of fame.” Do you agree that, in exchange for celebrity, people in the public eye should expect their lives to be put on display? Why or why not?
- 3.** Zach is shocked to learn that, despite their divorce, Rebecca never rescinded his medical power of attorney over her—that the matter of her life support fell to him. Upon Rebecca's hospitalization, however, he immediately cedes this responsibility to her parents. Did you agree with Zach's decision here? Do you think you would have behaved similarly, had you been in his position?
- 4.** When Zach first meets Kate, he assumes she's trying to poach his scenic property and rips her legal documents in half. Have you ever similarly misread a situation upon meeting someone—and reacted in a

way you regretted? How was the misunderstanding ultimately resolved?

**5.** *Overkill* hinges on a serious issue of medical ethics: not only who should bear the responsibility of making a life-or-death medical decision on behalf of another person, but also whether it is right, at all, to discontinue life support. Rebecca's father firmly believed that "God, and only God, [could] call Rebecca home when it [was] her time." Discuss the moral implications of this kind of judgment call, and what stance you, personally, take on this issue.

**6.** Zach recognizes that the burden of Rebecca's condition is a heavy one to bear, especially when he learns that Doug, Rebecca's father, carries the burden alone after Mary passes away: "Four years is a long time for a loved one to be in the shape Rebecca is." Have you ever acted as a caregiver for a family member? What, in your opinion, does it take to maintain hope and resilience in this kind of situation?

**7.** At the coffee shop, Kate admonishes Zach for his initial behavior toward her. How do you navigate interpersonal confrontation? Do you lead with humor and physical bravado, like Zach? Or do you prefer to spar with your wits, like Kate?



**8.** Eban is introduced to the reader as the “son of Sid. [A] bigwig locally. Big Rich on anybody’s list.” Despite the heinousness of Eban’s crime, his sentence is reduced by a judge early on, due, largely, to his familial connections. How did you feel, reading this? What did it make you think about, in terms of what we value as a society, especially when it comes to money, influence, power, and violence against women?

**9.** Deputy sheriff Dave Morris tells Kate that he has a hard time working up a “bleeding heart” for Zach, despite the difficulties he has experienced in life, like Rebecca’s situation, the loss of his parents, and the end of his athletic career. Do you think it’s true that people have a harder time summoning sympathy for people who are perceived to be “privileged”? Did you relate to Dave’s stance here, or were you horrified by his remark?

**10.** Zach is presented with an impossible decision: bring Eban Clarke to justice by ending Rebecca’s life, or do nothing, and let a violent assailant walk free. If Kate had presented you with this choice, what would you have done?

**11.** Apart from the “personal agony” of having to make this decision, Zach tells Kate that the “blowback” from ending Rebecca’s life would be more than he is

willing to endure. Have you ever struggled to make a decision, not because of its consequences, but because of other people's reactions? Explain.

**12.** When Rebecca went into the bedroom that night with Eban and his friends, many said she “got no better than she deserved . . . She lived wildly, recklessly, and paid the price.” When you first read about Rebecca's situation, who did you blame? Did reading the first scene sway you either way? Would your opinion have changed if you had never read the prologue at all?

**13.** Neither Zach nor Kate had siblings. Do you believe that having a similar childhood can make you naturally drawn to another person? What about personality? Do you believe like-minded people form the strongest connections? Or do you think there's a reason why opposites attract?

**14.** At one point in the novel, Kate enters her apartment and experiences a “creepy sensation.” She discounts the feeling, but Zach doesn't: “I trust your instincts even if you don't.” Have you ever had a moment when your instincts telegraphed something important, even if, at the time, you didn't know what was going on? How much importance do you personally place on intuition?

**15.** Ultimately, you learn why Kate is so motivated to put Eban behind bars. How did learning more about Kate's backstory inform your understanding of her perspective, especially when she said that "to claim an unbestowed right to another person's body is a crime"? How does this idea relate to the circumstances in which Rebecca found herself?

**16.** Upon meeting Kate, Bing tells Zach that she isn't exactly what he pictured when he thought of a "state prosecutor." Including stereotypes, how else were appearances deceiving in the novel, especially when it came to Kate, Rebecca, Eban, and Zach?

**17.** Zach and Bing have a special relationship. In many ways, Bing is a father figure to Zach, and Zach is a son to Bing. What nonfamilial relationships in your own life have been the most meaningful to you? In what ways have you chosen your own family?

**18.** *Overkill* ends with a shocking revelation. How did you process the novel's final reveal—and the conclusion overall?

# AUTHOR ESSAY

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COVID wreaked havoc. In every aspect of our lives, we felt its ravaging effects.

Of its dreadful consequences, one that I found particularly upsetting was that of families having to make the impossible decision whether or not to remove a loved one from life support. Science, medicine, and technology have gifted us with remarkable apparatus that can sustain life even when a patient's condition is most dire and the prospect of a positive outcome is negligible.

Conceptually, then, taking a preemptive step to end one's suffering and allow for a more peaceful exit could be considered a mercy.

However, in actuality, saying "when" and switching off the machines that are prolonging the life of a mother, father, child, and best friend is a torment like none other for the person vested with the responsibility of doing so. It's a choice that no one should ever have to make.

But one day you might. One day *I* might. As I thought on that, the inevitable question that stopped me in my tracks was: *If that life-or-death decision was mine alone to make, what would I do?*

Having asked myself that, I got the idea for OVERKILL, because a formidable scenario such as that brings into question one's stance on morality, spirituality and religion, loyalty, legality, unconditional love, and just plain

*humanity.*

Which is also what a good story does.

So I took the idea, rolled up my shirt sleeves, and got to work plotting a story that would chronicle the main character's struggle with this super-sensitive and often polarizing issue. It's been debated over supper tables and argued in courts of law. Advocates on both sides of it fiercely defend their position. And because both viewpoints have merit, those who waffle somewhere in the middle remain ambiguous on the matter and usually agree with the last speaker, hoping that they'll never have to contend with it.

What would be my character's perspective, I wondered. At that point, I had no idea. The only thing I knew for certain was that in the telling of his or her story, I would try to be fair, equally representing all standpoints whether or not I agreed with them.

I began where I always do—with a *What if?*

What if my protagonist, who's living the American dream, suddenly and without warning gets a call informing him that someone's life hangs in the balance, and HE's the one who must decide whether or not to—crudely put—pull the plug?

*What's worse*, what if the individual rendered “brain dead” after a sexual assault isn't a loved one, but his ex-wife, whom he hasn't even seen in five years and for whom he feels nothing but justifiable scorn? Out of spite and unbeknownst to him, his ex had added a provision



to her Medical Power of Attorney that overrode the automatic revocation that would have taken place upon their divorce. He remains her agent of record, the one appointed to carry out her advance directives regarding her medical care and end of life.

That would be a kick in the teeth for anyone. But, *even worse*, what if he is a mega-celebrity who can't possibly keep this soul-wrenching decision private, but must make it in a global arena under the glare of a white-hot spotlight?

Meet Zach Bridger, NFL record-breaking quarterback, Super Bowl MVP, poster child, and media darling—and also a target. His brief but tumultuous marriage to red carpet diva Rebecca Pratt was exploited in the tabloids step by sensational step from their first public appearance together right up to their scorched-earth divorce.

When Zach is notified that Rebecca's condition is described as "unresponsive," he's appalled to learn that he's the one legally assigned to determine her fate, and it seems that everyone in the world has an unswerving opinion on what course he should take. He's at the epicenter of what immediately becomes a contentious national debate continually fed by the media. *What will Zach do?*

I'm giving nothing away here. All of the above is revealed in the first several pages. Zach's being struck by this unfathomable blow from out of the blue is the catalytic event that begins my book but upends my hero's

life. Things will never be the same for Zach Bridger...and the worst is yet to come.

The present-day story opens four years following Rebecca's catastrophe. The fallout from the controversy it ignited cost Zach his "mind game," which to an NFL star was as crippling as a compound fracture of the tibia. His career derailed, he now lives embittered and reclusive, desiring nothing except privacy and distance from the nightmarish experience.

Enter Kate Lennon, a smart, savvy state prosecutor who isn't afraid of tackling tricky cases. Kate's current project is to nail Eban Clarke, the millionaire playboy who orchestrated the sexual encounter that ruined Zach's life and left Rebecca in a persistent vegetative state. Kate is seeking Zach's help to bring Eban to justice. Zach would like nothing better than to see Eban put away for good. But there's a caveat: For Eban to be indicted on a more serious charge, Zach will once again be required to decide Rebecca's fate, a hobbling responsibility from which he can't escape. The last thing he wants is further embroilment and negative publicity. Who could blame him?

But I completely understand Kate's determination to get justice, even if it means taking drastic measures that repel and anger Zach.

They butt heads. Neither is wrong; both are right. Secondary characters either support or negate their individual viewpoints. Each of them has a quiver of arguments so persuasive that by the middle of the book,

I realized that I was one of those wafflers stuck between diametrically opposed schools of thought.

Coming to terms with that wasn't my only challenge. I needed to weave Zach and Kate's soul-searing moral dilemma into a novel of suspense. In addition to the obstacles imposed by jurisprudence and their own consciences, they also needed to be wrestling something with muscle, with teeth. They needed a flesh-and-blood foe.

Eban Clarke fit that bill.

Eban is a handsome, suave, glib, wealthy, sexually deviant *sociopath*. He oozes charm and menace in equal portions. He feels zero remorse for what happened to Rebecca. Beyond being despicable, he's dangerous.

These are the three main characters. Each has a goal that is at cross-purposes with the goal of the others.

As the story unfolded, it became clear that Zach has much more honor than I initially gave him credit for. Or that Kate gave him credit for. He's Prometheus, bound to the responsibility that Rebecca imposed on him.

Kate craftily deals with the intricate legal maneuvers necessary to bring Eban to trial. It isn't an easy path, but she doesn't buckle under pressure. With her combination of boldness and compassion, she earned my utmost respect.

Even as Kate and Zach battle their individual demons, they're also fighting their unethical but oh-so irresistible attraction to each other. (After all, this is a Sandra Brown book.)

Eban surpassed the villainy I had in mind for him. He took his role and ran with it. I stood by and watched as, with maniacal glee and a bent toward violence, he plotted his escape from the legal snare Zach and Kate were laying for him. As he saw it, Rebecca had to stay alive. It was Zach and Kate who had to die.

I wrote this story in the hope of keeping readers on edge, fearing Eban's treachery against Zach and Kate and wondering what Zach would do, worrying about the outcome.

At the same time, I strived to evoke both pathos and passion, to give heartstrings a good, strong tug, and to leave the reader asking: *If I were in Zach's shoes, what would I do?*

His story is fiction, the product of my imagination.

I lament that far too many people have to experience his dilemma for real.



# OVERKILL MENU

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Pulled pork is a big thing in North Carolina, and since the lion's share of the book takes place there, here is a very easy recipe for the slow cooker.

- 3 lbs pork tenderloin
- Barbecue Pork Rub (various brands available in the spices section)
- 2-liter bottle of Root Beer

Liberal­ly coat the tenderloins with the rub and place in a slow cooker. Add root beer to cover tenderloins. Slow cook on low 8-10 hours until meat is falling apart. Drain most of liquid. (I leave a little because I like it juicy.) Shred the meat using two forks or utensil designed for shredding. Add one bottle of commercial barbecue sauce – your choice, but I recommend Jack Daniel's, KC Masterpiece, or Stubbs Original. Toss until meat is covered. Keep warm in cooker until time to serve. I suggest serving on slider buns with cole slaw. Many add the slaw to the sandwich, but I prefer it on the side. It's easy, casual, delicious.



It's not "light fare," and not for vegetarians, but great for tailgating, and Zach was a football player!



Keep dessert light.  
Like your sorbet of choice.  
Berries on top are optional.  
(As is a splash of vodka straight  
from the freezer!)

# FUN FACT

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It occurred to me about halfway through the writing of OVERKILL that on a subconscious level, I had named Zach's ex wife Rebecca, the name of the title character in Daphne du Maurier's haunting novel.

As with the Rebecca in my story, even though she's not actually there, she's an omnipresent antagonist. Her memory bedevils her husband, Maxim de Winter, and prevents him from finding happiness with his young, unnamed bride. You've probably seen a movie version, or you're at least familiar with the basic premise, but if you haven't actually read the book, I urge you to.

It's not a classic for nothing. When it was first published in 1938, it set the bar for gothic novels.