

Book Club Questions – The Secret of Everything

The main character in *The Secret of Everything*, Tessa, is a guide for adventures tours. As a guide, she plans daily activities, keeps the group on schedule, and arranges for hotel stays and meals. Have you ever taken a guided vacation tour? Did you like it? If you haven't taken a guided tour before, would you consider it?

How much responsibility do you think Tessa bears for what happened to Lisa on her last tour adventure?

Tessa is a photographer, and, by the nature of viewing her surroundings through that lens, she sees the world differently than other people. Do you think her unconventional upbringing helped shape that world view? Why or why not?

How important did you find the animal companions in the book? Do you believe Felix was a reincarnation of Bella, or just the right dog at the right time?

Tessa's father is guided by superstitions. Have they informed and protected him over the years or held him back?

After Tessa's near-drowning experience as a child, Sam rescues her and takes her away, posing as her father and omitting many things about her past. Do you think Sam acted heroically in this instance? Did he do the right thing for Tessa, or more harm than good?

Sam argues that he should have prevented Tessa from going to Los Ladrones, which angers Tessa because all the secrets she'd uncovered would have remained a secret if she hadn't made this trip into the past. Tessa says she would still have no clue about who she was. Has Tessa's life been a lie?

In college, Tessa fell in love with an avid hiker and camper and tagged along so she could spend more time with him. Turns out, being out in the world, under the sky, touching the earth . . . sweating, walking, thinking, admiring, gave her a joy she otherwise wouldn't have known and in those outdoor experiences, she found her calling. Do you have any outdoor activities that you enjoy? Any that ground you and help you with your troubles or bring you joy?

Tessa recalls snippets from another time when visiting Los Ladrones, and these missing pieces shine a spotlight on the two black holes in her life—the guilt over Lisa's death and the jigsaw puzzle of her mixed-up memory. The trip to Los Ladrones is a pilgrimage of sorts, that helps Tessa gain clarity on both of these things. Would she have made the same kind of progress if she hadn't made the trip?

When Tessa and Vince come together, they both have long, complicated backstories and plenty of baggage between the two of them. Barbara O'Neal specializes in writing about relationships with men and women in their thirties, forties, and beyond, people who have led other lives

before starting something different with a new love interest. Do you have a preferred age group that you like to read about?

There are four main female characters in the book—Tessa, Natalie, Vita, and Annie and they all are experiencing deep grief from different events in their lives, each handling their grief in different ways. Do you think they would have made it to the other side of their grief without one another? Whose grief struck you as the hardest hit?

Who was your favorite character in the story? Why?

Despite Tessa's unconventional early life, she still felt normal. With the revelations she discovers about her past in Los Ladrones, she had to admit she was not. What she learns rocks her entire world. In a world where no two families are alike, what constitutes normalcy?

The pilgrimage trail that Tessa walks with Natalie gives her a chance to hike, repent, and meditate. On this walk, she considers that she had been blocking her happiness by never naming what she wanted. As a wanderer, she'd never thought about what she might want nor had to define it. Do you think she had been blocking her own happiness, or do you think she needed to work through her past before she could define what she wanted for her life?

The dishes served in the book emphasize the power of good, nourishing food, prepared with love while providing comfort and healing. Do you have a go-to dish when you need a meal like this? Tell us about it.

The Secret of Everything includes a number of recipes for the dishes served at the 100 Breakfasts Café, but perhaps the best recipe of all comes at the end of the book, from Natalie: Natalie's Recipe for a Happy Sunday Breakfast. If you were to concoct your own Happy Sunday Breakfast recipe, what ingredients would you choose?

Barbara O'Neal is known for her luscious descriptions of food and deep, sensory descriptions of the settings for her books. Have you read other books by Barbara O'Neal? What has drawn you to them? What have you liked—or not liked—about them?

How would you describe this book to a friend?

What is the secret of everything?