

Book Club Questions – The Lost Recipe for Happiness

Elena suffers multiple, catastrophic injuries in the car accident that takes the lives of the four other people in the car. The weight of the loss makes her feel that she must leave home, and she goes on to work in kitchens around the world. She is a woman in a man's profession, working with a broken back in a career that requires a tough spine. Is she punishing herself for being the lone survivor of the wreck? Did she choose this hard path to prove herself as being worthy of surviving? Or do you think this path chose her?

Kitchens were often the only safe place in Elena's world . . . or were they? Her financial stability relied on her work as a chef, yet we see in the story that she has moved from place to place. She is a woman in a man's world and often harassed and tested because of it. She has lost romantic partners from being committed to her job, and lost her last job from getting romantically involved with the executive chef. Elena no doubt takes comfort in cooking and in the delights of food but does this comfort mask the reality of kitchen life? Do you think kitchens were the safe spaces for Elena that she said they were?

The main characters in Aspen—Elena, Julian, and Ivan—have all struggled to find a happiness that would stick around. What is happiness? Does it come from within or does it depend on outside forces?

On the night of Julian's dinner party, Elena thinks about her lost love, Edwin. What shape would her life had taken if he'd lived? If the night of the accident never happened? Where would she be? She emphatically knows she would not be *here*, in Aspen, if not for that fateful event. Do you ever think back on events of your life and wonder where you'd be if you'd made different decisions or certain events had never happened? Are there things in life you wished you'd done differently?

Elena has strong intuition, often encouraged or affirmed by Isobel's commentary. Both Elena and Isobel's first instinct about Ivan is to be careful of him. We see this intuition again when Elena spies Ivan and Patrick's closeness on Julian's deck after the dinner party. She wanted to protest against the two of them together, to tell them that they would ruin each other, but something stops her from intervening. *Maybe people had a perfect right to ruin each other, even choose it.* What do you think of Elena's inaction in this moment? Should she have stepped in to caution her friend, or was she right to let the Ivan-Patrick relationship play out?

Bringing a restaurant together is a complicated puzzle. As Elena contemplates assembling the pieces of The Orange Bear, she thinks through the many, many elements that go into creating a successful restaurant. What do you notice when you go to a restaurant? What brings you back to your favorite dining places? Is it the food or something more?

In their first meeting, Julian asks Elena to name the five best things she had ever eaten. Food is often memory. Can you name the five best things you have ever eaten, anywhere?

The ghosts of Elena's loved ones kept her safe and kept her company until she wasn't alone anymore. By the end of the story, Elena has found brothers in Ivan and Patrick, a sister in Mia, a daughter in Portia, and a partner in Julian. Do you think Elena was finally able to let go of her past because she found this surrogate family to fill the void of the one she lost, or do you think she, herself, had healed enough to let these people and their love into her life? Did one beget the other?

The Lost Recipe of Happiness is a quest for healing, part romance, part foodie fiction, and part ghost story. Is there one element of the story that most appealed to you? What did you like about it?

Elena has worked all her life to have a kitchen of her own. As the executive chef at The Orange Bear, she is both tough and fair. Have you had a favorite boss in your professional life? What traits did this boss display that made that person stand out?

One of the fun things in this book is the names of the different restaurants—The Blue Turtle, Yellow Dolphin, Purple Tuna, and Orange Bear. If you were to name a restaurant, what would you call it and why?

Magic Realism is a style of fiction that incorporates magical elements into real world settings. In The Lost Recipe for Happiness, the ghosts of Elena's past are as real as the people she encounters every day. Did you like the inclusion of these ghosts as a very real part of the story? Why or why not?