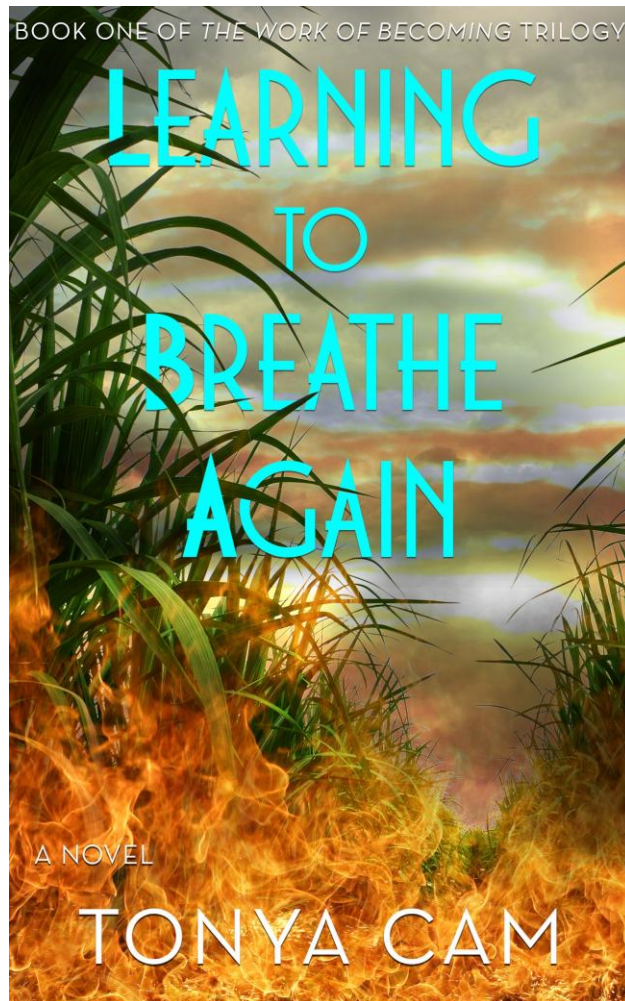


BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

Learning to Breathe Again: Book One of The Work of Becoming Trilogy

*Twenty-nine discussion questions, historical background,
and a free author visit for your group.*

tonyacamauthor.com



LEARNING TO BREATHE AGAIN

A Novel · By Tonya Cam

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A Note from the Author

This novel began with a conversation I almost didn't have.

In the final months of my father's life, he told me things about his childhood he had never shared before. Small, vivid details like the layout of the city block where he grew up, what his parents were like, and stories about the friends he had. He also told me about the brother he never got to meet. A brother who died at the age of one, of asthma. That brother became the inspiration for Janie.

When my father died, writing *Learning to Breathe Again* was my way to keep both of them alive.

To be clear, this novel is not my father's story. Mary and Elena grew out of the world he described, along with a lot of what ifs. So did Edward, William, Gertrude, Frank, Dr. Brown, and everyone else who moves through this story. But the world itself is real, and I have tried to fill it with as much honesty as I could.

The Depression is not ancient history. It shaped the lives of people who are grandparents and great-grandparents of readers alive today, and it shaped them in ways that were rarely spoken of directly. The silences around that era are part of its legacy.

Mary and Elena are my attempt to give voice to those silences. To say that the women who lived through those years had interior lives of real complexity and real ambition, constrained by a world that gave them few choices. To say that the history of what women gave up, and what they found a way to want anyway, is worth documenting alongside the history of stock markets and wars and political movements, even when, especially when, it was never written down.

My father never got to read this book. This story is, in every way that matters, his gift to me. I have tried to be worthy of it.

Thank you for giving it space in your lives. If you would like me to join you for an evening to share your thoughts about it, I would be glad to. I visit book clubs for free, and I delight in hearing what Mary and Elena's story meant to you.

Tonya

About the Book

Two women. Lives they didn't choose. A friendship that dares them to want more.

Miami, 1933. Mary Simons was supposed to fill her scrapbook with photos of her baby's first smiles, locks of fine hair, and handwritten milestones. Instead, she records respiration rates and temperatures, hoping science can save what love can't. When her baby dies, the future she imagined dies with her.

A thousand miles north, Elena Wagner has spent years burying the girl who nursed her mother and sister through their final days. Silk dresses and a husband who adores her keep the grief at arm's length. But an unplanned pregnancy, and a Depression that won't end, threaten to pull her back into the one role she swore she'd never play again.

A chance encounter at the Chicago World's Fair brings the two women together. When circumstances relocate them both to the sugarcane fields of Depression-era Florida, an unlikely friendship becomes the one thing they can't afford to lose. In a time when women are expected to endure in silence, Mary and Elena must decide: keep performing the lives they're supposed to live, or risk it all for the women they might still become.

A character-driven novel about love, loss, friendship, and courage. Sometimes the hardest thing isn't holding on. It's learning to breathe again.

312 pages

For readers of Fiona Davis, Kristina McMorris, Marie Benedict, and Lisa Wingate.

Before You Begin: What's Real

Nearly everything in the background of this novel happened.

The Chicago World's Fair. A Century of Progress opened on May 27, 1933, at Northerly Island on Lake Michigan. Twenty-two million people came that first season, and sixteen million more in 1934, during the worst years of the Depression. Florida Day was September 14, 1933. The Hall of Science, the Skyride, the Havoline thermometer, the Streets of Paris. All of them are real.

Dr. Martin Couney's infant incubators. Between 1896 and 1943 Couney exhibited premature babies in incubators at fairs and expositions, charging admission to fund the care and treating the infants free. He is credited with saving more than six thousand lives. Audiences paid a quarter to look at them.

Father Charles Coughlin. By 1934, the radio priest reached roughly thirty million listeners a week. He began as a populist and a Roosevelt supporter and became isolationist and openly antisemitic. William became a fan early, and his perspective changed as Father Coughlin's did. His National Union for Social Justice, which William joins during this novel, became a big part of this.

Clewiston. A real town on the southern shore of Lake Okeechobee. The sugar mill there was built in 1928 by B. G. Dahlberg. When his Southern Sugar Company went bankrupt in 1930, Charles Mott bought it and renamed it the United States Sugar Corporation, which is still around today. The Clewiston Inn is still open on Sugarland Highway.

The cane fires. Burning the fields before harvest, to drive out snakes and rats and make cutting faster, was a practice imported from Brazil and Cuba. The effect on air quality in flat, windless inland Florida was documented for decades. For someone with asthma, burn season was genuinely dangerous.

Women and science in 1935. In 1935, under pressure from the legislature, the University of Florida opened its pharmacy program to women. Mary's opportunity is real. The author did not invent her path, only gave her the courage to take it.

A note on two liberties. The Clewiston Inn described here was built in 1938, and documented cane burning in Clewiston began in the early 1940s. Both were moved to an earlier date for the story, and the author explains this in the Note about the History.

The full historical note, including Dr. Couney, the Joliot-Curies, the Buckman Act, Shirley Temple, and Mary's homemade spirometer, is in the back of the novel, along with a reading list for interested readers who enjoy going down the rabbit holes that historical fiction books open for them.

If You Only Have an Hour

The twenty-nine questions contained in this discussion guide are more than any group can get through in one evening. If you want a discussion that does not feel overwhelming, these six work well. The first is easy to answer and gets everyone talking. The last one (hopefully) sends people home still thinking about their answers.

- 1.** Mary gives up her dream of studying chemistry with Dr. Brown at the University of Miami to go to Clewiston with Edward. Was this sacrifice noble, misguided, or something in between? At what point does selflessness become self-erasure?
- 2.** Mary tells Elena: “I used to feel sorry for you. That you’ve had so much loss you were scared to love anyone again. But that’s not it. You’ve just chosen not to value those who love you.” Do you agree with this assessment? Is it fair?
- 3.** Is Elena’s decision not to tell William about Clark an act of love or the ultimate selfishness?
- 4.** Mary becomes Gertrude’s primary caregiver despite not being her mother. Elena is Gertrude’s biological mother but struggles to care for her. What does this novel suggest about what makes someone a mother?
- 5.** Mary and Elena’s friendship is complicated. Is their relationship ultimately healthy or unhealthy for each woman?
- 6.** The novel ends with Mary moving away to Gainesville while Elena remains trapped in her situation. Whose future concerns you more? Whose gives you more hope?

Full List of Discussion Questions

These are all of the discussion questions, grouped by theme. You are welcome to work through every one of them, or to pick the handful that speak to your group the most and build your discussion around those. There is no wrong way to use them.

Characters and Choices

1. Mary gives up her dream of studying chemistry with Dr. Brown at the University of Miami to go to Clewiston with Edward. Was this sacrifice noble, misguided, or something in between? At what point does selflessness become self-erasure?
2. Elena struggles to bond with Gertrude from the beginning. How much of this stems from her past, and how much from her personality? Do you find her to be a sympathetic character?
3. Both Edward and William make major life decisions without consulting their wives. How do Mary and Elena respond differently to this? What do their responses reveal about each woman? Do you feel this was common in that era? What about now? When do you think this changed?
4. Mary tells Elena: “I used to feel sorry for you. That you’ve had so much loss you were scared to love anyone again. But that’s not it. You’ve just chosen not to value those who love you.” Do you agree with this assessment? Is it fair?
5. Is Elena’s decision not to tell William about Clark an act of love or the ultimate selfishness?
6. By the end of the novel, do you think Elena has actually changed?

Marriage and Partnership

7. Mary and Edward’s marriage improves when he finally asks about what’s in her journals and offers to leave Clewiston. Elena and William’s marriage deteriorates through silence and secrets. What does the novel suggest about what makes a marriage work?
8. Elena justifies her affair by pointing to William’s emotional distance. Does the novel validate her reasoning, condemn it, or present it as more complicated than either?
9. Compare the moment when Edward says “I think you can manage,” in Chapter 13 to the one where he says, “If you tell me you can’t do it, I’ll listen” in Chapter 23. How has Edward and Mary’s relationship changed during that time? What do you think has caused that change?

Motherhood

10. Mary becomes Gertrude’s primary caregiver despite not being her mother. Elena is Gertrude’s biological mother but struggles to care for her. What does this novel suggest about what makes someone a mother?
11. Gertrude calls Mary “Ma” throughout the novel. How did you feel when Mary finally corrects her at the end? Should Mary have corrected her sooner? If so, why do you think that she didn’t?

- 12.** Mary lost Janie. Elena lost her mother and sister to tuberculosis. How does grief shape each woman's approach to motherhood and caregiving?

Dreams and Ambition

- 13.** Mary wants to be a researcher, not a nurse or doctor. Why is this distinction important to her? How do society's expectations for women limit her options?
- 14.** How do the losses Elena experiences when she moves to Clewiston compare to Mary's?
- 15.** Dr. Brown tells Mary: "Don't stop learning, Mary. Science will be here when you're ready." How does this advice sustain her through her time in Clewiston?

Friendship and Secrets

- 16.** Mary and Elena's friendship is complicated. Is their relationship ultimately healthy or unhealthy for each woman?
- 17.** By the end of the novel, almost everyone is keeping secrets. Is secret-keeping ever justified? When does protecting someone become lying to them?
- 18.** When Mary confronts Elena about the affair, Elena chooses to tell her the truth. Could she have kept the truth hidden? What do you think would have happened if she had?

Setting and Atmosphere

- 19.** The smoke from the cane fires serves as both a literal threat to Mary's health and a metaphor throughout the novel. What else might the smoke represent?
- 20.** Clewiston is described as isolated, suffocating, and inescapable. How does the setting reflect the characters' emotional states? How does it differ from Miami and New York in the characters' minds?
- 21.** The 1933 World's Fair was called A Century of Progress, and it was built to celebrate what science had done for human life. Mary walks into it having just watched her daughter die of something science could not yet fix. How did you read her response to the Hall of Science, and can a place be inspiring and cruel at the same time?

Historical Context

- 22.** The novel is set during the Great Depression. How does economic hardship shape the characters' choices and options? Would any of them have made different decisions in more prosperous times?
- 23.** Women's roles were severely constrained in the 1930s. How do Mary and Elena navigate these limitations differently? Which approach do you feel is more effective?
- 24.** Father Coughlin's radio program and the National Union for Social Justice appear in the novel. If you're familiar with this history, how does knowing about the movement in a historic context affect your reading of William's involvement?

- 25.** Elena's father was Jewish, though her family practiced Ukrainian Catholicism. How might this hidden heritage create tension as William becomes more involved with Father Coughlin's movement?
- 26.** Dr. Martin Couney's incubators were real, and so was the admission fee. He is credited with saving more than six thousand premature babies at a time when hospitals considered them hopeless, and audiences paid a quarter to look at them in glass cases. Does a good outcome settle the question of whether the exhibit was right? What does that encounter mean for a woman who has just lost a baby of her own?
- 27.** In the historical note, the author admits to moving the Clewiston Inn a few years earlier and to imagining cane burning a decade before it is documented in Clewiston. Where is the line for you between a novelist shaping history and getting it wrong? Did knowing about the changes alter your trust in the rest of the book?

Looking Ahead

- 28.** The novel ends with Mary moving away to Gainesville while Elena remains trapped in her situation. Whose future concerns you more? Whose gives you more hope?
- 29.** If you could give advice to Mary or Elena at the end of this book, what would you tell them?

A BONUS CHAPTER

Epilogue: Elena, August 1935

There is one more chapter in this story.

Elena, August 1935 takes place after the last page of the novel. It is yours for free at the end of the book, and it raises a lot more questions about what really happens to Elena after this novel ends.

Stop here if you have not read it.

*The following questions lead into the second novel in the trilogy,
The Seduction of Belonging.*

Epilogue Questions

*Spoilers from the epilogue throughout. Read *Elena, August 1935* first.*

1. William knew about Elena's affair for a while but said nothing until after his recovery. Was his silence strategic, self-protective, or something else? Does knowing he kept this secret change how you view his character?
2. Elena learns that Clark "has done this before, different years, different women." How does this revelation reframe her affair? Does it make her more sympathetic or less?
3. Frank tells Elena that "everyone knows" about her affair. Throughout the novel, Elena believed no one knew. What does this suggest about self-perception versus how others see us?
4. Elena's talent for dressmaking lands her a customer, then within hours, she learns that William is moving them to Michigan. How did you feel watching this possibility taken from her? Is William being cruel, practical, or both?
5. William threatens Elena with divorce and loss of custody if she doesn't comply with his plans. Given the legal realities of 1935, does this make him a villain, or is he simply using the tools available to him?
6. The chapter ends with Gertrude calling Elena "Mama" and Elena convincing herself "everything would be fine." Do you believe her? What do you predict for Elena's future as she enters William's world of Father Coughlin and the National Union for Social Justice?
7. By the end of the epilogue, the power dynamic between Elena and William has completely reversed. She held secrets; now he holds leverage. What do you feel about this change?

I Would Love to Join Your Discussion

I visit book clubs for free. No fee, no minimum number of copies.

By Zoom, I can join you anywhere in the country for thirty to forty-five minutes, whatever suits your group (just let me know at least two weeks in advance).

In person, if you are within driving distance (150 miles) of Gainesville, Florida. A dozen people in a living room is a great night as far as I'm concerned.

Some groups want a straight question and answer session. Some want me to listen to the discussion and come in at the end. Some want twenty minutes and then wine. Tell me what your club likes and I will work around it.

I am happy to talk about the research I did for this novel, what I changed as I wrote it and why, what my father told me, or anything your group argued about and could not settle.

Email me: tonya.camaratta@gmail.com

Schedule a visit: tonyacamauthor.com

What Comes Next

Learning to Breathe Again is the first book of **The Work of Becoming**, a trilogy following Mary and Elena from 1933 to 1945.

Book One. *Learning to Breathe Again* (1933 to 1935). Miami, the Chicago World's Fair, and the sugarcane fields of Clewiston.

Book Two. *The Seduction of Belonging* (1938 to 1941). New York, Philadelphia, and Peoria. William goes deeper into Father Coughlin's movement, and Mary finally gets her laboratory. Available now.

Book Three. *Molded by War* (1941 to 1945). Peoria. Publishing February 23, 2027.

If Your Group Liked This Book

From the reading list in the back of the novel:

Dawn Raffel, *The Strange Case of Dr. Couney*. The incubator story told in full.

Alec Wilkinson, *Big Sugar: Seasons in the Cane Fields of Florida*. The Clewiston sugarcane fields, including the harsh conditions and the exploitation of migrant workers.

Donald Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio*. The most thorough account of Coughlin's trajectory from reformer to demagogue.

Shirley Temple Black, *Child Star*. A remarkably personal and entertaining autobiography from the greatest child star of all time.

The photographic archive of the 1933 Century of Progress World's Fair, held at the Chicago History Museum. Much of it is available online.

Thank you for reading, and for giving this book discussion an evening of your lives.

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