



rare bird



Reading Group Guide

by Anna Whiston-Donaldson



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1. After her son dies, Anna affirms, “Jack was well prayed for. . . Prayers of courage. Prayers of protection,” and she asks, “Was it all a crock?” Ultimately she concludes, “We can’t keep our children safe. . . . We don’t know what the future holds.” What is your response to this? Are you shocked by the author’s bluntness? Is it a truth you’ve already discovered? How? If you are a person of faith, how does this idea affect your beliefs?
2. When her mother died relatively young of a brain hemorrhage, Anna realized that “life wasn’t fair, it would never be fair, and there was nothing I could do about it.” Have you—or when did you—acknowledge the unfairness of life’s events? Have you made peace with the seeming inequity? How?
3. When Anna realizes that Jack has been carried away by the creek, she writes, “I don’t know how I know at that second that Jack will die, but I do.” Have you ever experienced a “knowing” prior to a disastrous event? If so, what was that intuition like, and what did you do about it? When the event was confirmed, did your prior intuition help at all to ease the trauma you felt? On balance, is “knowing” a good thing or bad? Why?
4. As rescue workers piece together the situation, Anna says, “I hold Jenn’s hand and kneel cursing and praying.” If you have found yourself cursing and praying at the same time, describe what happened to you, and what you said. What was the result of those prayers?
5. Anna mentions that the verse Jeremiah 29:11, “which we . . . had used as some sort of blanket promise that life would be okay, sure seems like a load of bullshit to me now.” Discuss a time the Scriptures that once comforted you suddenly felt like salt in a wound. As time passed, did you remain alienated from the Bible and/or God, or did you change over time? If you changed, what caused the shift?
6. In the hours after Jack’s death, Anna receives what she regards as two signs of God’s kindness: a silhouette made by flashlight of Jack’s profile, and a Bible passage that popped up on her phone. Have you ever experienced God showing up in unexpected, and apparently coincidental ways and times? If so, what happened? Did those experiences help you?
7. Anna writes about how cautious she was concerning her children’s safety, how people thought her overprotective. In the end, vigilance doesn’t save Jack, and Anna marvels that the neighbors’ “kids are all fine and my son . . . spent the night in a refrigerator somewhere.” When have you seen or experienced caution failing? Would you say you have become more or less guarded since, knowing danger sometimes wins?
8. “Standing in this little cemetery on this gorgeous September day, I feel like I’ve been forced onto a scary, dangerous amusement park ride, constructed by a psychopath, not a loving God.” Is Anna’s visual strike you as apt and true? Can you relate to the idea of being forced into a terrifying situation against your will? In your opinion, are we at the mercy of an impersonal universe, fate, a psychopathic God, or something else? How does your understanding of this mystery shape your days?



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9. For months, when Anna goes to school to pick up her daughter, Jack's classmates come to hug her. "I try not to act greedy or needy. [But] I am starved for a touch of Jack's people, his tribe. . . . They tell me Jack stories, . . . offering them to me as precious jewels." When you were in the midst of enduring calamity, what did you long for? Was there something you craved but didn't recognize until someone supplied it? What "jewels" can any of us give to someone in a dark place?
10. While some friends avoid her, a few seek out Anna to talk and cry with her. "I'm grateful that they, clueless and scared, will venture into the grief with me." Anna confesses that she herself has been "a drive-by friend. . . . I'm the type of person you would want around for a broken ankle, but not for chronic depression." Are you the type who avoids others' grief or one who walks right into it? Why?
11. As the author struggles to make sense of Jack's death, she finds, "I can't believe in a God who would take my son in order to make me more compassionate, loving, or holy. I'm afraid that would be a deal breaker." What issues are nonnegotiables in your relationship with God? What event(s) could break this most personal of all bonds? If you've been crushed by loss, what did the experience do to your faith? Your understanding of God?
12. Anna experiences what she calls "pockets of peace," moments when contentment, rest, and joy fill her heart: "It is a peace that is completely incongruous with a wrenching away, a violent death, dashed dreams, and wasted potential." Describe your own "pockets of peace." Where do they come from? How do they help?
13. Anna finds that she and her husband grieve differently. She wants to "cocoon" at home and spend quiet time together as a family. Tim wants activity, hobbies, even to do things he once did only with Jack: anything is better than "another sad, empty day." How do you and your partner face grief or tragic circumstances? How are you alike—what keeps your bond strong even as you cope in unique ways? What is good about how your partner grieves? What is good about the way you do it?
14. Before and after the death, people see visions and have dreams of Jack. Anna is encouraged yet also concerned that these apparitions are self-created. Then she asks, "Or could it be that at times like this, when the unimportant falls away like chaff to the ground, we are finally able to recognize what God is doing in the world around us every single day?" What do you think about such signs and wonders—are they wishful thinking or something more? Do you believe people can conjure up the messages they need to hear? Anna decides to "accept any comfort these signs bring." Describe a wonder you or someone you know has experienced. What was the result?
15. "Jack is dead. I will not kill myself today. Help us! I'm trying." This is Anna's daily prayer as she slogs through the adjustment to her loss. When you've experienced loss, did you pray? What did you say? Were there things you could not bring yourself to say? Was prayer helpful?



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16. Anna begins talking to Jack, saying small things like “I love you, Jack” and “I’m sorry, buddy.” She acknowledges, “It feels good to speak into the silence . . . to say the words in present tense. Because my love is not in the past.” Do you speak (aloud or silently) to people you’ve lost? Why or why not? Is there any benefit to doing so?
17. As the one-year anniversary of Jack’s death arrives, Anna and Tim find themselves grateful for friends who’ve stayed close. “They let themselves get muddy and wet . . . [from] tears and the messiness of grief, both ours and their own. These relationships and the friends that have supported us . . . are in some ways the collateral gains of our losing Jack.” While it may seem inappropriate, even offensive, to think of “gains” in relation to loss—have you found any in your seasons of grief? Describe them.
18. One day Anna realizes she is better: she feels less vulnerable in public, she enjoys the taste of ice cream, she makes plans, she anticipates lighthearted things like a new season of TV programming, she can buy apples without focusing on their being Jack’s last snack. “I don’t know what has changed in the months since, but I don’t want to die anymore, at least not yet.” When have you turned a corner in your recovery from something? Was there a catalyst, or did pain just finally ease up, even microscopically? What would you say to someone who is sure things will never get better?
19. “I’m packing up my dead son’s things so we can put the house on the market. It is miserable, holy work.” What activity have you found awful but necessary, even valuable? What events or rituals have you experienced as holy? Does the sacredness of something terrible soften the pain of it?
20. Have you found, as Anna did, that “in times of heartbreak, God is closer than our own skin”? Why or why not? If so, how? How does this affect how you are approaching your future today?