

Reading Group Guide

*This reading group guide for **The Gravity of Birds** includes an introduction, discussion questions and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

Introduction

Alice Kessler and her older sister, Natalie, first met the brilliant young painter Thomas Bayber towards the end of summer in 1963 while vacationing with their parents in upstate New York. Both sisters were drawn to Bayber, and their encounters with him that summer changed their lives and their relationship with each other forever.

Forty-four years later, Bayber is a renowned yet dissolute artist nearing the end of his life. He summons Dennis Finch, an art history professor intimate with Bayber's work, and Stephen Jameson, a young art authenticator hoping to regain respectability in his field, to show them a previously unknown painting: Kessler Sisters, a disturbing work that depicts the young Bayber, Alice, and Natalie. Bayber's desire to have the painting sold ignites a chain of events requiring Finch and Jameson to find Alice and Natalie. But the sisters have disappeared without a trace.

The story weaves together the past and the present, revealing the sisters' histories with Bayber as young women, as Finch and Jameson come closer to locating them and learning the truth. It is an emotionally gripping story that shows how families tear themselves apart and then try to bind themselves together again, not always resulting in the same fabric.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Reread "No Voyage" by Mary Oliver, the poem that opens the novel. Alice puzzles over this poem at the beginning of the story, trying to understand the "secrets in the lines." (p. 9) How do you interpret the poem? Now that you have read the novel, think about the poem in the context of the characters and their situations. How would young Alice relate to these verses? How would Alice feel differently about the poem as an older woman?
2. When Alice stops by to see Thomas at his lake house, she decides: "This place was like Thomas...flawed and sad, yet perfectly true." (p. 19) Look back at a description of each place. How do the various settings throughout the novel reflect the people who occupy them? Are the characters able to leave their pasts behind by relocating? Discuss how settings, particularly homes, preserve memories and emotions.
3. Thomas tells Alice that the job of an artist is "to make people look at things—not just

at things, but at people and at places—in a way other than they normally would. To expose what’s hidden below the surface.” (p. 20) How does Thomas achieve this in his paintings of the Kesslers?

4. Alice suffers from rheumatoid arthritis for the majority of her life, and the illness almost becomes its own character with an active role in the story. Other than its obvious role in restricting Alice’s physical abilities, how else does Alice’s illness affect her life as well as the lives of the people around her?

5. The story is told from multiple perspectives: Alice, Finch, and Stephen, but never Natalie or Thomas. Discuss how this narrative style affected your reading experience. What does each person’s point of view contribute to the story? Why do you think the author chose to leave out the voices of Natalie and Thomas?

6. Finch and Stephen are both in the art world, but have contrasting ways of approaching art, even differing in their opinions as to the way art is best viewed: “...people go to museums to see an exhibition someone has told them they have to see. The implication being that unless they see this particular exhibition, and have the appropriate reaction to the work, they have no real appreciation for art.” (p. 173) Discuss whether the environment in which we see art influences our experience of it, and how you feel viewing art in a crowd versus viewing it in a more intimate setting.

7. Natalie and Alice have a strained, sometimes hostile relationship. Yet there are a few moments in the novel when Natalie is truly there for Alice. Explore some of the factors at play in this sibling relationship. Does Alice always deserve the reader’s sympathy? Do you think Natalie deserves Alice’s hatred? (p. 204) Does she deserve the reader’s hatred?

8. Alice is drawn to both Thomas and Phinneaus, two very different men. What does she see in each of them? Discuss how love can take many forms, and consider other instances of love between characters.

9. When Alice discovers her daughter is alive, she contemplates what it means to be a mother: “So she was someone’s mother...But evidently not the sort who would know, instinctively, her own daughter was alive.” (p. 259) What does it mean to be a mother? Do you think Alice is right to identify with Frankie’s mother?

10. Before Alice’s trip to Santa Fe, Agnete was unaware of her true past. Alice assumes that since “Natalie went to see her twice a year...Agnete must have loved her.” (p. 265) Imagine the conversation between Agnete and Alice, when Alice reveals what actually happened. Do you think Agnete tries to justify or excuse Natalie’s actions when she is talking to Stephen? If so, why? Talk about the role of forgiveness in the story.

11. Find descriptions of the Bayber lake house and compare them with Thomas’s rendering in *Kessler Sisters*. What elements does Thomas include and why? Dennis and Stephen infer things about the relationship between Bayber and the sisters based solely on the painting: “On canvas at least, the sisters seemed to have no connection to each

other, circling in separate orbits, whether around their parents or Thomas.” (p. 298)
Discuss how Dennis and Stephen interpret both the painting and the small sketch of the Kessler family. How accurate are their speculations?

12. When he needs advice or another opinion, Finch often turns to his “spiritual advisor”—his deceased wife, Claire. Do you think this is a healthy way for him to cope with her death? All of the characters in the novel experience some sort of loss, and each of them deals with it in their own way. How do different characters come to grips with loss in the novel?

13. Why do you think the title of the novel is *The Gravity of Birds*? The gallery owner in Santa Fe muses that “people envy them the ability of flight...Maybe not just their ability to fly, but to fly away from, is that it?” (p. 281) Do you agree with him? What do birds symbolize in the book? Find other examples of symbolism in the text.

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Visit a museum or gallery and view the artwork through Stephen’s technical lens. Look for patterns in an artist’s signature or technique. Then regard the same art as Dennis would approach it, in an emotional visceral way. Discuss the merits of each method of appreciation. Describe a work of art—be it a drawing, painting, piece of sculpture, or photograph—that you have found particularly moving.

2. As a child Alice loved to sit in the woods, waiting for a glimpse of a bird. Take a trip to the nearest park or garden and try to spot a bird you’ve never seen before. Or visit the Audubon website to learn more about different bird species: Birds.Audubon.org/

3. Thomas doesn’t get the chance to tell Stephen the truth about their relationship in person, although he does so in the letter that ends the novel. But he doesn’t write a letter to his other child, Agnete. Pretend you are Thomas and write a letter to Agnete, or discuss what Thomas might have written (or said) to Agnete given the chance.