

# READING GROUP GUIDE

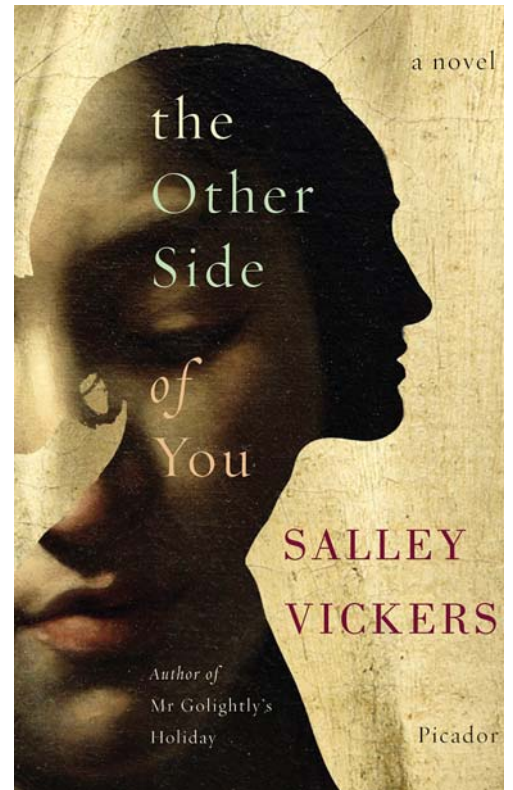
## *The Other Side of You*

*A Novel*

*by Sally Vickers*

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### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Other Side of You* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Other Side of You*.

### About the Book

Salley Vickers has been widely praised for her perceptive novels, which capture both the vulnerabilities and the bold transformations of richly imagined characters. In *The Other Side of*

*You* she brings us a powerful meditation on love in all its manifestations, woven with captivating themes of art, psychology, and literary history.

Psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Dr. David McBride has never come to terms with the violent accident that took his brother's life during their boyhood. When a mysterious new patient named Elizabeth Cruikshank comes into his care, her experiences with loss and hopelessness tap a well of emotion in David, leading him to confront not only his grief over his brother's death but also the painful dynamics of his marriage and other unsettling aspects of the way he has shaped his life.

Elizabeth's traumas led to a suicide attempt, followed by deep reticence. It is not until David recalls a painting by the Italian artist Caravaggio that she finally yields her story. As she recounts the chance encounter that took her to Rome, and her tragic tale of passion and betrayal, David begins to find a strange and disturbing reflection of his own loss in the haunted "other side" of this elusive woman. Through one long night's dialogue, they journey together into the past, opening a new vision of the future for each of them. As they explore the ways love and art can penetrate the complexities of the human heart, David and Elizabeth provide rich inspiration for a reading group's discussion.

## **Praise for *The Other Side of You*:**

"A heartbreaking novel and, yes, a love story. If you enjoy the work of Marilynne Robinson, Penelope Fitzgerald, James Salter, or Anita Brookner, you should be reading Salley Vickers, too."—*The Washington Post Book World*

"Splendid . . . A delicate, intelligent novel . . . intricately constructed."—Maureen Corrigan, NPR's *Fresh Air*

"An accomplished and absorbing novel about revelations on both sides of the therapeutic process."—*The Boston Globe*

"Vickers tackles two of the essential questions--how to love and how to lose--with such passion that the heart, like Elizabeth's own, cannot help but burn."—*The Observer* (London)

"[A] smart, haunting exploration of love and loss."—*The New York Observer*

"A former psychologist herself, Vickers brings an erudite precision and an elegant perception to her lyrically poetic testament to the vitality of love and the human capacity to both seek out and run from its ennobling grace."—*Booklist*

## About the Author

A former psychologist and professor of English, Salley Vickers is the author of *Miss Garnet's Angel*, *Instances of the Number 3*, and *Mr. Golightly's Holiday*. She lives in London.

## Discussion Questions

1. How did you picture the narrator as you read the initial paragraphs of *The Other Side of You*? How did those first impressions compare to the David McBride who emerges as the novel unfolds?
2. What techniques does Salley Vickers use to blend a fast-paced story line with intense psychological explorations? How does she strike a balance between every-day reality and gorgeous wishes?
3. Track down a copy of T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* and read the lines that surround the book's epigraphs; they can be found in the section Eliot titled "What the Thunder Said." What is the effect of the way the quotation is used to introduce each part of the novel? How do Eliot's scenes of desolation and thirst relate to the notion of our "other sides"? Who are the phantom-like "thirds" walking beside the novel's characters?
4. Discuss the many parallels between David's story and Elizabeth Cruikshank's. Did it enhance your reading for David to tell both stories, revealing his past in first person and weaving Elizabeth's details throughout in his own voice?

5. David tells us much about the evolution of psychiatric care in England. What are his opinions of the changes made in his profession over the years, from increased patient rights to the wane of lobotomies, such as the one Mrs. Beets's husband experienced? What do these opinions, as well as his interactions with various patients, tell us about his outlook on humanity itself?
6. In what ways is David's approach in treating Elizabeth unconventional, particularly during her last session? Would she have experienced true healing with a more conventional therapist? What "cure" did she evoke in David?
7. What spurs the turning point that marks the end of part one? How did Elizabeth help David to fully understand the lines that open part two, "Age and disease and death may destroy our physical being but it is other people who get inside us and damage our hearts and minds"?
8. David tells us that his mother was inclined to protect her daughters more than him. How do his perceptions of his mother influence his perceptions of women in general? How does his family history shape his beliefs about a man's responsibilities?
9. Why did Elizabeth marry Neil? Would she have experienced the marriage as "awful" even if she had never met Thomas? What is at the root of her hesitation to leave Neil, no matter how much anguish her staying causes?
10. Part two, chapter two, ends with David's description of an egoist: "armored against disappointments...the undisputed center of the world." Does Olivia fit his definition of an egotist? What is the nature of his attraction to her?

11. How does the story of Peter (the “wolf man”) shape the novel? How is David affected when his optimistic decision about Peter goes badly? What metaphor can be drawn from Peter’s illness—the notion that fear causes him to harm other people?
12. At the end of part three, chapter two, David admonishes us to beware of those who care. What does he begin to understand about Jonny’s death at that point? How does it give him the courage to deliver his liberating lines to Olivia in chapter four?
13. Discuss the paintings and corresponding scripture that serve as a catalyst throughout *The Other Side of You*. What themes were most striking to you in these narratives? In what way were they an appropriate backdrop for the questions raised by the novel?
14. How do the novel’s two settings—Italy and England—speak to the characters’ mind-sets? What did both locales mean to David and Elizabeth (and even to Keats)? What makes Caravaggio’s life an ironic footnote to the novel?
15. Discuss the various types of love described in *The Other Side of You*. Why isn’t Olivia drawn to the idea of parental love? How would you characterize the way David and Gus support each other? What sort of love develops between Elizabeth and David, and why doesn’t it manifest itself in a long-term relationship?
16. How does David’s concept of mortality and fate shift throughout the novel? What lessons does he take from the way Thomas’s story ended?
17. What forms of love have been most prominent in your life? Have you ever experienced a powerful “what if” like the one Elizabeth carried away with her for years after her brief encounter with Thomas?

18. Salley Vickers's previous novels have featured a variety of characters who overcome isolation or grief. How does *The Other Side of You* give voice to this theme? What inspiring notions of healing exist in her fiction?

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