



FLATIRON
BOOKS

Nine Perfect Strangers Reading Group Guide

Welcome to the Reading Group Guide for *Nine Perfect Strangers*. Please note: In order to provide reading groups with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal important aspects of the plot of this novel—as well as the ending. If you have not finished reading *Nine Perfect Strangers*, we respectfully suggest that you may want to wait before reviewing this guide.

1. In *Nine Perfect Strangers*, there's a fair amount of commentary about women and their self-loathing, especially directed toward their bodies: "Women and their bodies! The most abusive and toxic of relationships. Masha had seen women pinch at the flesh of their stomachs with such brutal self-loathing they left bruises. Meanwhile their husbands fondly patted their own much larger stomachs with rueful pride." Do you think this is true? Why do you think men and women have such different relationships with their bodies?
2. Do you think it's important that Masha is a foreigner, and that perhaps being new to the society allows her to view its norms in a way that someone growing up there might not be able to do?
3. What did you make of Zach's suicide? Do you think it was because of his asthma medication? Was Heather wrong not to tell Napoleon about the possible link to his medication after she discovered it?
4. "Carmel wasn't wearing a body. It was so wonderful and relaxing not wearing a body. No thighs. No stomach. No bum. No biceps. No triceps. No cellulite. No crow's feet. No frown marks. No caesarean scar. No sun damage. No fine lines. No seven signs of aging. No dry hair. No frizzy hair. No gray hair. Nothing to wax or color or condition. Nothing to lengthen or flatten, conceal or disguise." What did you think of this scene when Carmel was body shopping? What point do you think the author was trying to make? Can you relate to this? Why, or why not?
5. Frances observes, "Girls who wore fuck-me boots in the eighties were now wearing mother-of-the-bride outfits with pretty bolero jackets to conceal their upper arms." In your experience, have you found this to be true?

6. At one point Jessica says, “The question is: Who gets to decide if I’m beautiful or not? Me? You? The internet?” And later, “Jessica thought those dreadful Kardashians were stunning. It was her prerogative to think so. Before the money Ben had drooled over images of luxury cars and Jessica had drooled over pictures of models and reality stars, that were maybe photoshopped, but she didn’t care. He got his car, she got her body. Why was her new body more superficial than his new car?” How much do you think our notions of beauty are shaped by social media? Does Jessica have a point about her body versus Ben’s car? Do you think women are made to feel superficial about what makes them feel good versus men?
7. In chapter 6 it says, “Frances had struggled to explain that strangers were by definition interesting. It was their *strangeness*. The not-knowing. Once you knew everything there was to know about someone, you were generally ready to divorce them.” Do you think Frances felt remorse about her two divorces? Later on, Tony says about his wife and divorce: “Wasn’t it possible they both took each other for granted? Wasn’t it possible that taking each other for granted was one of the benefits of marriage?” What point do you think the author is trying to make about marriage? Do you believe marriages can last? Do you think Napoleon and Heather’s marriage will last?
8. Frances says in chapter 8, “No, no, I’m not a woman of age and circumstance! I’m me! You’re not seeing *me!*” Do you think the author is trying to make a point about women in middle age and invisibility?
9. *Nine Perfect Strangers* looks at the notion of transformation. “Oh, to be transformed, to be someone else, to be someone *better*.” Do you think these nine characters are really looking to be transformed? What does transformation mean to you? Do you think it’s really possible?
10. When reading a book she finds infuriating, Frances thinks: “It was *cute* that the bespectacled author imagined twentysomething girls ever whispered ‘I want to fuck you so bad’ into the ears of fiftysomething men. She would give the author a consoling little pat on the shoulder the next time she saw him at a festival.” What has been your experience with regard to older men and younger women?
11. Lars thinks to himself in chapter 15: “He never ceased to be amazed by the obedience of people at these places. They allowed themselves to be dipped in mud, wrapped in plastic, starved and deprived, ricked and prodded, all in the name of ‘transformation.’” Do you agree? What’s the oddest thing you’ve ever had done to you for health/beauty reasons?
12. The novel sometimes portrays men as imperious, as when Frances remembered her first boyfriend and how she apologized for having small breasts (!)—and he accepted her apology (!!). Frances’s mother was a feminist, so “she couldn’t blame her upbringing for her pathetic behavior.” What do you think happened there? Why do you think women apologize so much?



13. When Carmel thinks of her divorce and how her husband fell out of love with her and conveniently into the arms of a younger woman, she thinks to herself, “It happens a lot. It’s essential the discarded wife remain dignified. She must not wail and weep, except in the shower, when the kids are at school and preschool, and she’s alone in the suburbs with all the other weeping, wailing wives. The discarded wife must not be bitchy or unkind about the new and improved wife. She must suck it up but without developing a sour face. It is better for all concerned if she is thin.” While some of this train of thought is tongue in cheek, how much truth is in there? Do you think the author got it right?
14. The end of chapter 21 reads, “It was at this moment that Carmel Schneider gave herself to Masha with the same voluptuous abandon that novice nuns once surrendered themselves to God.” Do people (women, in particular) devote themselves to attaining an unattainable standard of beauty the way religious fanatics used to devote themselves to God? If so, why do you think so?
15. In chapter 26, Napoleon thinks, “He’d been too young and happy to know that love wasn’t enough; too young to know all the ways that life could break you.” Do you agree with him? Do you think this is a question of age, or do you think one needs a true tragedy in their life before they can feel this way?
16. After Napoleon discovers that Heather never read the possible contraindications for their son’s asthma medication, the narrator says, “He could find hatred in his heart for her, too, if he went looking for it. The secret of a happy marriage was not to go looking for it.” Do you agree that this is the secret to a happy marriage? Do you think it’s a conscious choice to have a happy or bad marriage?
17. In chapter 23, it says, “Other people’s problems were so simple; one’s own problems tended to be so much more *nuanced*.” Do you agree? Were there any characters you believed you had figured out only to discover they were more complicated than you had initially thought?
18. In chapter 33, it says, “She dared to look up and the stars were a million darting eyes on the lookout for rule-breaking in her story: sexism, ageism, racism, tokenism, ableism, plagiarism, cultural appropriation, fat-shaming, body-shaming, slut-shaming, vegetarian-shaming, real-estate-agent-shaming. The voice of the Almighty Internet boomed from the sky: *Shame on you!* Frances hung her head.” What do you make of this passage?
19. When Frances is tripping, she imagines her friend saying to her, “‘You’re easy: you’re the princess,’ said Gillian. ‘The passive princess waiting for yet another prince.’” Do you agree with Gillian? Do you think it is a fair assessment of Frances? Do you think the author is making some bigger commentary about women, or female characters in fiction?



20. Frances says to Carmel, “Let’s talk about something other than men, Carmel, before we fail the Bechdel Test.” The Bechdel Test “is a method for evaluating the portrayal of women in fiction. It asks whether a work features at least two women who talk to each other about something other than a man” (Wikipedia). Do you think the author made a conscious decision to have female characters with agendas besides finding a man? In fact, would you say that the author’s female characters from her previous novels share this trait? Moreover, what do you then make of the fact that it’s Frances who actually gets married in the end and Carmel seems fairly content not having a man?
21. In chapter 61, Heather thinks to herself, “It looked like girls were controlled by their feelings but the opposite was true. Girls had excellent control of their feelings. They spun them around like batons: *Now I’m crying! Now I’m laughing! Who knows what I’ll do next! Not you!* A boy’s emotions were like baseball bats that blindsided him.” Do you agree? Do you think women and men grow out of these tendencies, or do they carry them into adulthood?
22. Masha thinks to herself in chapter 13, “The biggest compliment you could give a successful woman was to describe her as ‘humble.’” Do you agree? Do you think society finds successful women threatening but successful men attractive?
23. In chapter 75, Carmel thinks “that Joel wouldn’t even notice any difference in her. You never changed your appearance for men, you changed it for other women, because they were the ones carefully tracking each other’s weight and skin tone along with their own; they were the ones trapped with you on the ridiculous appearance-obsession merry-go-round that they couldn’t or wouldn’t get off. Even if she’d been a perfectly toned and manicured gym junkie, Joel would still have left her. His ‘lack of attraction’ had nothing to do with her. He hadn’t left her for something better, but for something new.” Do you agree that women are more interested in impressing other women than men? Why or why not?
24. What do you think about the end of the book and Masha? Were you surprised to find out that she had children of her own? Do you think your opinion of her would be the same if she was a man who had left her family?
25. Lars and Masha are the only characters who seem to have professional ambition. But with Lars, we see that he is driven by revenge against his father. What do you think motivates Masha?
26. Do you think the author is trying to make a point by having Masha, arguably the most intimidating and strongest (and weakest) character, be a woman? In chapter 76, her ex-husband thinks of her as “a woman with the strength to move mountains . . . a woman as weak as a child.” What do you think he meant here? What do you make of her? She’s such a strong confident character, but does the end of the novel make you view her differently?

