Welcome to the Reading Group Guide for *The F Word*. 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 *The F Word*, we respectfully suggest that you may want to wait before reviewing this guide.

1. Discuss the novel’s opening line: “There’s the truth and then there’s the lie that people want to believe.” How does that distinction apply to Olivia’s life?

2. At her dinner party, Olivia argues that celebrities shape our lives without our even realizing it: “Being a woman can be such a mystery sometimes, we unconsciously look to these celebrities as surrogate mentors for our own femininity. They appear to be so natural, that we look to them to set the standard. . . . I’d even go so far as to say that you owe your very marriage and current happiness to none other than Caroline Whatever-Her-Name-Is.” What do you think? How are celebrities portrayed in this novel?

3. Olivia claims that the “ugly truth about women and gossip” is “we only talk shit about the women we’re afraid jeopardize the things we have and want. That’s why when I was fat, people made fun of me, but no one gossiped about me. Why? Because nothing of theirs was ever at risk of being taken by me, least of all their men.” Do you agree? Discuss the various female friendships in this novel and how they are often tied up with jealousy, weight, and beauty. How do Olivia’s friendships compare to her mom’s?

4. Olivia argues, “Everyone has a story about who they are. Not just celebrities. Look at social media—we’re all pushing some version of the life we want you to believe. It’s all just PR.” Do you think social media has changed our relationship to fame and celebrity? To ourselves?

5. For Olivia, her obsession with her weight is tied to a much larger issue: “When a woman calls herself fat, she’s voicing the deep fear that she is, in fact, unlovable. It’s just easier to talk about juice cleanses and Cardio Barre than the deep abiding shame we fear is threaded into our DNA.” Do you agree? Why do you think there is still so much pressure on women to be thin? Why is weight so often tied to self-esteem?
6. Olivia reflects: “Caroline’s Super Hobo should meet my Sweaty Marble. They’ve turned out to be quite the similar pair of ghosts.” How do the various characters’ pasts both haunt and motivate their futures? In your opinion, how important is childhood in determining who we grow up to be?

7. Ben tells Olivia: “Lou was talking with me about those superheroes and how sometimes you need a person who is kind of a villain to take out the bigger villain. And the kind of villain who is…what did she say, only bad because people had been mean to them.” What does she mean by that? Are there villains in this novel, and if so, who?

8. Olivia initially describes Adam’s serial cheating as “essentially the golf of Adam’s busy schedule—a hobby I wasn’t interested in and was happy he did with other people.” For her, “In the end, I have to believe that marriages like ours last longer than the seemingly exciting, more volatile ones that soon fall prey to the whims of love.” Do you think there is any truth to that? Can a marriage still work if one spouse is unfaithful?

9. Olivia’s first panic attack comes when she tells Gus he needs to get out of “the monkey-house” that is L.A. What does she mean by that? How is L.A. portrayed in the novel?

10. Olivia says: “Growing up, we listen to love songs and believe that’s what real love is. As we get older, what sinks in is not that those songs are a fantasy, but that they simply aren’t about us.” Do you agree? How important is pop culture in shaping our self-image?

11. Olivia’s mom tells her: “Cheating is never about sex, honey.” Do you agree? What is Olivia’s relationship with sex throughout the novel? How is that tied up with her weight change?

12. Olivia admits that she isn’t necessarily a “good person”: “I was content with Adam because he never asked me to be a better person. He was kind of awful, too. God, we were terrible. In all these years of wanting to be envied and coveted, I never asked the simple fucking question whether or not I was good. Just good. Am I a good person? Because, it was never about people liking me. I never gave a shit about that. That’s why I was so free. I never cared.” What do you think? Is Olivia a “likable” narrator? Does it matter? Do you think you could do her job and be a nice person?

13. Discuss Caroline’s breakdown monologue: “Do you forget we’re people? Do you go into some zone when you’re asking about broken marriages and cheating spouses where you forget that I’m just a human being trying to get through the day? And if you say I signed up for this, you can go fuck yourself. I wanted to act because I had a shitty childhood and make-believing I could be anywhere else is how I got through
it . . .” Do you agree, or do you think celebrities should be held to a different standard?