

# *The Wonderful*

## Reading Group Guide

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

1. Chris is trapped in “the cage.” Who else is trapped in the novel, and in what way?
2. Is it ever okay to be cruel to be kind? Ruby and Todd put Chris in the back brace. Are they being cruel to be kind to Chris? Hedy plays along with her younger brother’s fantasies “because she knows his imagination lets him escape real life, helps him forget his pain.” (chapter 1) Is her kindness a kind of cruelty?
3. What do you think is happening during Chris’s experience of the wonderful light in the forest?
4. Although only 10 minutes older, Hedy in many ways acts more like Chris’s parent than his sibling. To what extent do you think the twins’ birth order affects their personalities? Does the unspoken, but very real, rivalry between Todd and Hank play out like a brotherly feud?
5. When teaching her students, Claire Banville remarks, “[s]ilence is powerful, isn’t it?” (chapter 31) What’s a more powerful force in *The Wonderful*: silence or speech?
6. “The world changes with knowledge, details that were always there emerging into view, like a photograph in developing fluid.” (chapter 29) Hedy’s process of growing up, of increasing her self-knowledge, is central to this novel. Is her maturation a slow blooming of what’s always been underneath? Does Hedy—and do we—find or create herself and her place in this world?
7. Imagination, writing, and the desire that underpins both are crucial to the plot of *The Wonderful*. What does this novel say about what art, such as literature, can or cannot do? Consider Christopher, Hedy, and these quotes from the book:
  - “He’s gotten used to separating his body from his mind; he can leave his flesh and bones behind to be poked and squeezed while his mind disappears inside a story.” (chapter 2)
  - “I suppose people invent things when their curiosity isn’t satisfied.” (chapter 10)

- “People need help to make sense of things, need a narrative, a purpose, an ending.” (chapter 48)
- 8. Why do you think Hedy dresses in her brother’s clothes?
- 9. “A wife should forgive her husband the natural faults of being a man.” (chapter 9) To what extent are relationships about accepting people for who they are versus pushing them to be (what we think of as) their best selves?
- 10. Can love ever be a bad thing? Does love make us blind? “It’s a trick of the mind, of love [Ruby] supposes, to keep seeing the person as they were, not seeing the daily deteriorations.” (chapter 1) Does love make us vulnerable? “The pain of loving Christopher is a mortal wound, yet Ruby wouldn’t know how to exist without it.” (chapter 9) Is love worthwhile?
- 11. “[Hedy] wants to roll time up like a carpet, roll it back to the moment she failed him, and do it all differently, be the sister she should have been, the one he deserved.” (chapter 23) Would you go through with your chance to fix the past, if given the opportunity?
- 12. In chapter 24, Hedy thinks, “grief isn’t a thing you can fight with weapons.” Do you agree?
- 13. When reuniting with Hedy as adults, Scott claims, “War doesn’t teach you about humanity....It just sucks away any faith you had in the world. Tramples it to death. War just makes you tired of life, is all.” (chapter 44) Do you think he’s right? Do you think Scott, Todd, or Hank learned anything from or was changed by their experience of war? Might war be more instructive or formative for those who experience it secondhand?
- 14. Did you suspect Hank at any time before the revelation? If so, what clues made you suspect him? In chapter 41, Hedy acknowledges that “good men do stupid things.” Is Hank evil, or might his “ends justify the means” line of thinking mitigate his behavior? Can any end justify experimentation on military personnel, or on children?
- 15. Do you have sympathy for Ruby? Is her fate perhaps better than having to deal with harsh truths and the loss of her family? Consider the end of chapter 38, when Hedy thinks, “But maybe wanting her back is selfish. If Ruby remains here, inside the walls of her own delusions, inside the routines of the asylum, she is protected from the unbearable truth. She is safe.” If you were in Ruby’s shoes, would you prefer to remember?