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The Nobodies

Reading Group Guide

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

1. Discuss the novel's title. Who are the nobodies? Consider in particular Joan and Thornton's conversation in the final chapter. What do you think Thornton means when he tells Joan he thought that the Bloom story would "make me feel like somebody," that he doesn't "know if that's how it's going to work for [them]"?
2. When we first meet Joan, she's about to interview once again for a position that she doesn't really want but needs. Preparing herself, she says, "This is that rock bottom I'm going to mine for the inspiring commencement speech I'll give at an Ivy League college in a few years." Have you ever taken a job that felt like a detour? Can those experiences be valuable? In what ways?
3. Before getting the job at Bloom, Joan worries, "I can't stop turning into someone I don't recognize. And I can't stop running away from the one question I won't ask: Am I a failure?" What is her definition of failure, and how does it change over the course of the novel? Discuss a moment of failure in your own life, and what you learned from it.
4. Success is also a key theme in *The Nobodies*. On her first day at Bloom, Joan runs into one of the company's cofounders, Chris. He tells her, "Just once I want to introduce myself to someone and have them not know who I am." Coming shortly after Joan has revealed her dreams of winning the Pulitzer, his statement is a bit jarring. How does this novel want us to think about the relationship between success and fame? Between fame and happiness?
5. At Bloom, thirty-six-year-old Joan finds herself surrounded by millennials with whom she initially believes she has little in common with. But as she gets to know her younger coworkers, especially Thornton and Hani, it becomes clear that she was mistaken. Have you ever befriended someone noticeably younger or older than yourself? If so, did you view the age difference as a barrier? An opportunity?
6. Discuss Joan's friendships with Lynn, Hugo, and Reuben, and how they compare and contrast with her Bloom friendships. Is Joan a different person with each group? Do you sympathize?
7. Joan's relationships with her family members are complicated. She interprets many of their comments and the ads for community colleges that her mother cuts out as evidence that

they don't believe in her journalistic talent. How do they model a different kind of success for Joan? What do you think of their encouragement for Joan to begin a career outside of her desired field?

8. Joan gets upset when her family and coworkers describe her as former journalist, putting her journalism career in the past. Since she was a teenager, her identity has been wrapped up in her job. Do you sympathize? How does Joan's approach to work change over the course of the novel?
9. Joan tells the story of her family dog, Alan, who got a backpack to calm his anxiety, and continues, "I too need a backpack. I too need to feel like I'm part of something bigger than myself. I too need to feel useful. What would it take—or who would I have to be—to belong somewhere? Actually belong, not just trying to fit in." Does she find a metaphorical backpack as her story progresses? Do you feel a similar need in your own life? Discuss.
10. With Joan's life split between her family's gardening center and the office, nature and technology both feature prominently throughout *The Nobodies*, colliding in the name of her new employer, Bloom. What purpose does this juxtaposition serve?
11. Toward the end of the novel, Joan reflects frequently on her brother Billy's remark that "no one story . . . no one *thing* is going to save you. . . . *You* are your one thing." What do you think he means by this? How does his view on where validation should come from contrast with Joan's? What does her experience tell us about the dangers of depending on the approval of others?
12. Joan's mother tells her, "There's a wonderful life in the gray area between happiness and misery, honey. Please use some of that wonderful, relentless curiosity of yours and try to find it." What does she mean? Do you think that you can have a good life without necessarily being happy?
13. What do you think the future holds for Joan and Thornton? How have they changed over the course of the novel?