



FLATIRON
BOOKS
NEW YORK

Tell Me How to Be Reading Group Guide

Welcome to the Reading Group Guide for *Tell Me How to Be*. 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 *Tell Me How to Be*, we respectfully suggest that you may want to wait before reviewing this guide.

1. The novel is narrated by both Akash and Renu. What is the effect of moving back and forth between their voices? Did you have a favorite character?
2. Akash loves his father deeply, but they have a dark secret “that binds us, even in death”: when Ashok found Akash’s letter to Parth, he makes his son promise not to tell Renu that he is gay. What is the significance of that moment in Akash’s life? Why do you think Ashok made him promise this, and do you sympathize? What changes over the course of the novel that convinces Akash to finally come out to Renu and Bijal?
3. Music is central to Akash’s life. What does music, and in particular R&B, mean to him? Did you have a favorite song or music memory from the novel?
4. Much of Renu’s relationship with Ashok was shaped by resentment: “My rage lived inside me, a fiery thing, glowing like hot embers, brighter each day. This was his life. His dream. Not mine.” Why does she have such a hard time embracing her new life in Illinois? What dreams does she have to sacrifice?
5. The Indian-American community plays an important role in the Amins’ world. Akash explains, “We would have been foolish not to unite. Because an Indian in America with no friends is like a spider with no legs. Just a thing to be stared at, ultimately dismissed.” What does he mean? What positive and negative effects does the community have in Akash’s and Renu’s lives?
6. Chaya is Renu’s best friend, almost like a sister, but there are things Renu has kept from her over the years and vice versa. What does their relationship suggest about trust and intimacy? Why, at the end, when Renu proposes a girls’ weekend in London and Chaya says she’s going to look at tickets, does Renu say, “But I know she never will”? Do you think their friendship is genuine, or one born out of convenience and necessity? Can it be both?
7. What is Renu’s relationship to her book club, and to Taylor and Shane in particular? What are the points of tension and bias between these women? What are their different motivations for being part of the book club?

8. As a boy, Akash internalizes the idea that he and his family “are not *those* Indians...The people who have lived in America for thirty years but still looked like they leapt off a boat.” What are the benefits and consequences of assimilation for the Amin family? How does racism affect Renu and Akash over the course of the novel?
9. Discuss the roles that class and wealth play in the novel. How does the Amins’ privilege set them apart from other Indian Americans, like Parth’s family, as well as Akash’s white classmates, like Lance? What are the limits of that privilege, especially in relation to racism?
10. Akash describes his parents’ approach to their family: “My parents had children for the sake of planting seeds. You don’t plant seeds expecting to grow dandelions. You want flowers, big and beautiful, the kind you display in a vase.” What do you think he means? Do you agree that this reflects Renu’s view of her children? If so, does that change over the course of the novel?
11. Akash has a complicated relationship with his brother, Bijal. He reflects: “I hated Bijal for everything I was not, everything beyond my reach, for living effortlessly in a world designed specifically for him.” Later, Bijal tells Akash, “Did you ever stop to wonder why I had to do that, Akash? Why I had to be perfect?...Because of *you*.” Why is the brothers’ relationship so fraught, and how does it evolve over the course of the novel?
12. In telling Akash about his marriage, Bijal says, “Jessica thinks I’m selfish. She says I wasn’t there for her when the baby died, that I left her to grieve alone. But what was I supposed to...It’s not my job to make her happy. I can’t do that for her. That’s not what a marriage is.” Do you sympathize with his perspective? How does it compare to Ashok’s approach to his marriage to Renu?
13. Looking back on her relationships with Kareem and Ashok, Renu reflects, “In life, the things we most desire are not always what we need.” What does she mean? Do you agree? How does this sentiment resonate in both Renu’s and Akash’s stories?
14. Akash is haunted by guilt for having punched Parth at the high school party he hosted with Bryce. Why does Akash make that decision? Were you surprised at how quickly Parth forgives him when they finally discuss it? In what other ways do Akash and Parth hurt each other as teenagers?
15. Why do you think Kareem doesn’t show up at the café? How does the resolution of Kareem and Renu’s story line compare to Parth and Akash’s? How do both Renu and Akash experience closure and disappointment?
16. Near the end of the novel, Akash and Renu are finally able to be candid with each other. Akash says, “This, too, must be what love is. An unveiling. To stand before someone and show them who you are.” How does their relationship evolve over the course of the novel? What do they unveil to each other? How does the phrase “show them who you are” contrast with the title phrase “tell me how to be”?