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BOOKS
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The Bartender's Cure Reading Group Guide

Welcome to the Reading Group Guide for *The Bartender's Cure*. 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 Bartender's Cure*, we respectfully suggest that you wait before reviewing this guide.

1. Discuss the novel's title, *The Bartender's Cure*. What does it mean to you?
2. Sam believes that “bartending and storytelling are inextricably linked.” How is this evidenced throughout the novel? Why is Sam so drawn to that aspect of her new job? Does it matter that the bar stories she learns are often not true?
3. Discuss this quote: “This is the beauty of having a local bar, really—it can be whatever you need it to be.” What does Joe's Apothecary represent for the different patrons that frequent it, as well as the bartenders who work there? The sociologist Ray Oldenburg coined the term “third place” to define a public, social space outside of work and home, such as a local bar, a library, a church, a café, a park, etc. What are the most important third places in your life? Do you see overlap between them and Joe's?
4. *The Bartender's Cure* is structured like a traditional bartending manual, with cocktail recipes and bartending tips and tricks woven throughout. What was the effect of that structure on your reading experience? What was the most surprising and interesting thing you learned about bartending from this novel?
5. The three Dan's at Joe's—Han, Carver, and Olsen—each serve as mentors to Sam. How are their approaches to bartending similar and different? How does Sam distinguish herself further from them? How do you think her new job of working for Gina will compare to Joe's?
6. Sam struggles to articulate what she actually wants in life: “It has always felt like a stupid question. Irrelevant. Because my own goals have been set from birth, unchangeable as my blood type: a good education, a good job, a nice suburban house, a nice suburban family.” What societal pressures does Sam feel, specifically growing up in Palo Alto? How do her experiences at Joe's lead her to rethink her goals?
7. Sam always believed her mother would have wanted her to go to Harvard Law School and lead a conventionally successful life. But Sam's father has a different view: “She wanted you to fit in better than she did. . . . Shave down the edges and make yourself round. When really she would have been better off finding a square hole that fit her comfortably.” Discuss

Sam's relationship with her parents, including her stepmom. How does Sam's understanding of them shift over the course of the novel?

8. Sam and her therapist discuss her "*apeirophobia*, the fear of the infinite," and her therapist stresses "the importance of *taking it one day at a time*, because looking at the great span of life is horrifying; because it is easy to get derailed when you start thinking about how you must always and forever foreswear your bad habits and your bad thoughts, but if you just think, *today I won't*, that feels attainable." How does Sam's apeirophobia manifest itself in the novel, specifically with regard to her bulimia? Do you agree with her therapist?
9. In looking back at their relationship, Sam says, "I was in love with Greg, and I am pretty sure that he was in love with me. But maybe that's not enough." What does she mean? What are the pros and cons of her relationships with Greg and Ben?
10. Sam reflects: "When I was growing up I was afraid of sex, because everyone loves to tell young girls how much of themselves they will be giving up in the act. But that isn't always true. Sometimes sex is the opposite of intimacy." What does she mean? What role does sex play in her relationships, especially with Greg and Ben? How is it affected by her eating disorder?
11. Greg and his friends ascribe to the Japanese concept of *ikigai*. Sam describes it as "a Venn diagram with four overlapping circles: what you're good at, what the world needs, what you love, and what will make you money. If you can find something that sits right in the middle, you will be successful and fulfilled." Do you find that to be a useful way of thinking about work? How does Sam struggle to find that balance in her own life?
12. The bartending world is overwhelmingly white and male. Han, as a Chinese American man, and Gina, as a white woman, both face obstacles at work because of their race and gender. What does Sam learn from each of them? How does her gender shape her experience as a bartender?
13. When Han finds out that Sam is leaving for law school, he is furious and disparagingly refers to her "bartending gap year." Why does Han feel so betrayed? Later, Sam reflects: "It's actually a pretty good name for it. But just because there's an expiration date on it doesn't mean I'm not serious." Do you think there's truth to that?
14. Carver and Gina argue over how best to run Joe's. What are their different approaches? What challenges do they face in keeping the bar profitable?
15. Near the end of the novel, Sam realizes, "in all my care not to build my life around a boy, I have built my life around a bar." What do you think she means? What might a healthier relationship with her place of work look like in the future?