



FLATIRON
BOOKS
NEW YORK

Yerba Buena

Reading Group Guide

Welcome to the Reading Group Guide for *Yerba Buena*. 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 *Yerba Buena*, we respectfully suggest that you wait before reviewing this guide.

1. What is the significance of yerba buena for Sara and for Emilie? What does it represent in the novel?
2. The narration alternates between Emilie’s and Sara’s perspectives. What are the similarities and differences in how they each see the world? Did you find yourself drawn to one in particular? How did the novel’s dual-voice structure affect your reading experience?
3. When Sara and Emilie first meet, Sara is bartending and Emilie is arranging flowers. Compare and contrast their jobs. What roles do taste and beauty play in their lives?
4. When Sara leaves Guerneville, she “had to sever her ties with this place as cleanly as she could. It had been a matter of survival.” Why does she feel that way? Do you agree that she is really able to sever those ties? Why does she make the decision to leave Spencer behind? Do you sympathize? How is life different for her in Los Angeles?
5. Sara and Emilie both have close and complicated relationships with their siblings. Discuss Sara’s relationship with Spencer and Emilie’s with Colette. How do those relationships change over the course of the novel?
6. Early in the novel, Emilie’s mother describes her as “my steady daughter, my good girl.” At different crucial points, Emilie’s parents tell her to “stay right here.” How does Emilie’s family see her, and what impact does that have on her life? How is she able to break free?
7. Sara describes grief as “the terrible weightlessness, something cavernous below.” How does her grief over her mother and Annie shape her life? Why do you think she has such a difficult time opening up to Emilie about her past?
8. Why do you think Sara’s father leaves the drawing of Annie in the water for Sara to find? How do you understand Spencer’s assertion that “it was never a taunt. It was a confession”? Do you agree?
9. Emilie cycles through five majors in seven years as an undergraduate. At one point, she “long[s] for the life of a fish. In and out of reeds they swam. All color and movement and

blankness.” What do you think she is looking for in college? Why does she struggle to commit to anything?

10. What does Emilie’s Creole heritage mean to her? How does she find meaning in her family’s past, specifically her grandparents? How does her passion for restoring and flipping houses draw on that past?
11. When Sara takes over Chloe’s apartment, they toast with Lillet: “Sara felt her vision sharpen, her mind clear. Here was the beauty of the etched glass. Slice of lemon. Gold liquid. Here was the taste of it—a little bitter, a little sweet, some citrus brightness, maybe honey. And here was *meaning*. A home, hers alone.” Why is this moment so important to her? How does it shape her life to come?
12. Emilie and Sara discuss Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* and its importance to each of them. How do both women pass in different ways, and how does that experience affect them both positively and negatively?
13. In reflecting on her affair with Jacob, Emilie thinks, “all this time, she’d only wanted to feel special.” How do you understand their relationship? What does Emilie gain and lose from it?
14. When Sara first sleeps with Emilie, she is reminded of Annie. Why do you think Emilie brings back those memories for her? How are Sara’s relationships with Annie and Emilie similar and different?
15. At Pablo’s art opening, Emilie tells him, “It’s like . . . the best possible thing art can do. It’s about you, but I see myself in it.” What does she mean? Do you agree?
16. The structure of *Yerba Buena* is relatively nonlinear: time is depicted as being quite fluid, and certain moments are revisited again and again. What effect does this have on the story? What do you think the author may be saying about the nature of memory and how we experience the passage of time?
17. Near the end of the novel, Emilie reflects on the different roles she has played in her life. At the flower shop, she was a vase; with Jacob, she was a flower; with her grandmother, she was water. How do you understand these analogies? What is she now?
18. What do you think the future holds for Emilie and Sara? Do you agree with Emilie that they are fated to “continue the dance” that is “so right while it lasted . . . so sweet, and bitter, too”? What pushes these women apart and pulls them back together again?