



# THE SUMMER WE LOST HER

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*This readers group guide for The Summer We Lost Her includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

## – INTRODUCTION –

For fans of Jodi Picoult, Meg Wolitzer, and Anna Quindlen, *The Summer We Lost Her* is a moving and heartfelt novel about a husband and a wife, a missing child, and the complicated family secrets that can derail even the best of marriages.

It's been a busy—and expensive—few years for Matt and Elise Sorenson and their young daughter, Gracie, whom they affectionately call Little Green. Matt, a Manhattan lawyer, has just been offered a partnership, and Elise's equestrian ambitions as a competitive dressage rider may finally vault her into the Olympics. But her long absences from home and endless hours of training have strained Matt and Elise's relationship nearly to the breaking point.

Now they're up in the Adirondacks, preparing to sell the valuable lakefront cabin that's been in Matt's family for generations. Both he and Elise agree it's time to let it go. But as they navigate the memories the cabin holds—and come face-to-face with Matt's teenage crush, now an unnervingly attractive single mother living right next door—Gracie abruptly disappears without a trace.

Faced with the possibility that they'll never see their daughter again, Elise and Matt struggle to come to terms with what their future holds. Over the course of Cohen's luminous novel, everything for the Sorenson family will change—the messy tangle of their past, the harrowing truth of their present, and whether or not their love will survive a parent's worst nightmare.

## – TOPICS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION –

1. Consider the novel's epigraph—a quote from Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*—and discuss how it relates to the themes of *The*

*Summer We Lost Her*. Why do you think the author chose this particular quote to frame her story?

2. Consider the structure of the novel—how do the alternating points of view between Elise and Matt enhance the story? Would the novel be different if it were told from only one side?
3. Over the course of the story, we learn that Elise and Matt had difficult childhoods in different ways, and they both feel shame about parts of their pasts. What haunts each of them? How do their pasts define them, and still affect them, as adults, spouses, and parents?
4. Near the beginning of the novel, Elise reminisces about the early days of her relationship with Matt, when they shared a walk-up apartment in Hoboken: “Dammit, they were happy. What it was about those days—she’d analyzed it many times—was that they were even” (p. 32). Consider this statement. How important do you think it is to be “even” in a relationship? How has being “uneven” strained Matt and Elise?
5. “I think the place you grew up, no matter how shitty or how stunning, it’s just in your blood. You’ve absorbed it” (p. 68). How do you think Elise and Matt have “absorbed” the places they grew up—for Matt, Lake Placid and New York, and for Elise, “the Coop”?
6. Elise believes that Gracie is capable of walking without her crutches, while Matt errs on the side of caution and insists she use them. Discuss this and other differences in Matt’s and Elise’s parenting styles. How do these differing beliefs affect their relationship?
7. Matt and Elise have very different memories of the day a favorite photograph of Gracie was taken—Matt remembers it as perfect, and Elise remembers it as anything but. Is there a moment in your own life that you and a loved one remember drastically differently? How so?

8. “All these years she’d been running from the wrong person,” Elise realizes upon finally reading the letters from her father (p. 289). Why do you think Elise was running from the mother who loved her so much?
9. A local Lake Placid woman remarks to Elise, “Wonderful to see you two are back together,” inferring that she thought Elise had split from Matt (p. 100). Later on, an old friend says to Matt, “Hell of a thing you did. Quitting law to stay home and raise your little girl” (p. 201). Why do you think these particular misperceptions bother Matt and Elise so much? Can you think of more ways rumors might be detrimental to a marriage?
10. At the beginning of the story, Elise’s seatmate on the airplane says to her, “The choices women make as mothers are forever under the microscope. Everyone has an opinion” (p. 10). How do you think Matt would feel about this statement? Do you think his judgment of Elise was fair or justified, given his position as her husband?
11. “You, precious, are my purpose,” Rosamunde tells Elise as a child (p. 148). Compare Elise’s relationship with Rosamunde to Elise’s relationship with Gracie. What do we learn about Elise’s personality from the flashback to Rosamunde’s death?
12. “Partnership and a good marriage, two or three kids—these goals might seem amatuerish and ‘picket fence’ lined up next to his wife’s but there you have it. . . . It’s not too much to hope for,” Matt thinks on pages 138–139. Elise later thinks to herself, “The man’s dreams were so attainable it was painful . . . With anyone else but Elise, wouldn’t he have that by now?” (p. 153). It can be difficult to maintain a relationship with someone who has drastically different goals in life—do you think Elise and Matt were mismatched from the start, or do you think it’s these differing goals that attracted them to each other?
13. After spending his whole life deeply admiring his grandfather, Matt gets a wake-up call that Nate was not the generous and

selfless person he long believed, but rather a “calculating man, a patriarch who used his power to prey upon people on the edge of financial desperation” (p. 273). How does Matt grow from the shock of this realization? What positive things do you think Matt learned from Nate? How might he apply these to his relationship with Elise and Gracie?

14. Consider Elise’s father’s statement: “When a person reaches that low point . . . all they have in front of them is their own pain. You can’t judge them on anything else” (p. 333). How could Matt and Elise both apply this observation to their relationship?
15. Discuss the ending of the novel. Where do you think Elise and Matt will go from here? Do you think their relationship is salvageable? What advice would you give them moving forward?

### – ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB –

1. Lake Placid Lodge, Mirror Lake, Whiteface Lodge, the Olympic Center, the North Elba Showgrounds—many of the beautiful and scenic Lake Placid locales the novel mentions exist in real life. Research the town of Lake Placid and plan an imaginary—or real!—trip with your book club.
2. Dressage, Elise’s sport, is often considered “ballet on horseback.” Research dressage—the United States Dressage Federation website is a great place to start—and watch dressage videos on YouTube (you can even watch videos from the actual 2016 Rio Olympics!) to get an idea of the type of routines Elise performs in her competitions.
3. Listen to the Joni Mitchell song from which Gracie gets her nickname—“Little Green.” The album it appears on, *Blue*, is largely considered to be Mitchell’s most emotional and beloved work and is revered for its deeply candid and poignant perspective

on love and relationships. Consider listening to the album in its entirety. Can you draw any other parallels to Matt and Elise's relationship and the novel as a whole?

4. Learn more about Tish Cohen by visiting her website (TishCohen.com) and Twitter (@TishCohen). Consider reading her previous novels with your book club. Compare her other works of fiction with *The Summer We Lost Her*.