

Reading group guide

For book clubs, library groups, festival conversations, and classroom discussion. Everything here assumes the group has finished the novel.

About this guide

This guide accompanies *Seeing More Than We Could See Before*, a multi-POV literary thriller that follows the deaths of Ruby, Charlotte, and Fox after a spirituality-and-meaning festival, and traces the aftermath through grief, law, philosophy, family life, and public blame.

The novel moves across perspectives including Ruby, Simon, Faith, Alex, and John, and through chapters that frame the tragedy in moral, emotional, legal, and existential terms rather than settling quickly into a single explanation. The chapter structure itself signals the book's range, moving from sections such as The Question of Meaning and Seeing the Cost to Meaning on Trial, Legacy and Liability, Shared Reckoning, and Guarding Dialogos.

The story frame

At the beginning of the novel, Ruby, Charlotte, and Fox leave the festival campsite before dawn, take a car, drive toward the cliffs, and arrive at the edge with a downloaded lecture playing from Ruby's iPad as the sun rises. In the aftermath, their parents, the festival organiser, and a philosopher associated with the festival struggle to understand whether the deaths were caused by neglect, symbolic misreading, altered states, private suffering, systemic failure, or some combination that resists simplification.

The novel's emotional and intellectual force comes from that resistance to easy causation. Again and again, characters try to make the tragedy legible through law, faith, psychology, public narrative, institutional accountability, or personal blame,

while the book keeps asking what it means to remain truthful when no explanation is clean.

Major themes

Grief and blame

Faith and Simon grieve Ruby differently, and their marriage becomes one of the novel's central arenas for competing forms of truth-seeking. Faith turns toward public accusation and moral clarity, while Simon seeks legal structure and evidence, even when that pursuit unsettles the narratives that grief makes emotionally necessary.

Meaning, awakening, and danger

The novel repeatedly asks whether language about awakening, transformation, thresholds, and letting the old self die can become dangerous when heard by vulnerable young people in pain. John recognises that metaphors intended to guide disciplined existential development may be received very differently by adolescents, grieving people, or those already narrowed by suffering, loneliness, and spiritual hunger.

Institutions under pressure

Churches, courts, universities, families, and festival communities all appear as partial containers for truth and care, but each is shown to have limits. The novel is especially interested in how institutions can protect, distort, weaponise, or fail lived reality once tragedy becomes public.

Pain and attention

Ruby's chronic pain is not background detail; it shapes how she relates to the world, to meaning, to family, and to ideas that promise a wider frame for suffering. The novel links pain to attention, salience, and the narrowing of the world, while refusing any simplistic claim that pain alone explains what happened.

Story and moral simplification

Media posts, legal arguments, spiritual discourse, and parental testimony all become rival storytelling systems in the book. One of the novel's deepest questions is whether the dead are being remembered as persons or converted into symbols for other people's philosophical, legal, or religious battles.

Character lenses

One way to split a discussion is to give each reader a perspective to hold.

Ruby

Pain, spiritual hunger, secrecy, adolescence, attention, longing for a way to understand suffering.

Faith

Maternal grief, Christian framing, public blame, the need to protect Ruby's meaning after death.

Simon

Law, evidence, paternal guilt, competing loyalties between truth, marriage, and memory.

Alex

Organiser responsibility, idealism, collapse of legacy, practical and moral accountability.

John

Philosophy, relevance realisation, ethical speech, the problem of how ideas land in the lives of others.

Charlotte and Fox

Awe, beauty, trust, vulnerability, and the danger of being known too late through aftermath alone.

Discussion questions

Opening responses

- 01 What was your first emotional response to the opening movement of the novel, especially the scenes involving Ruby, Charlotte, and Fox before dawn and the immediate aftermath for the adults?
 - 02 Did the novel ask you to revise your interpretation of the tragedy as it moved through different perspectives?
 - 03 At what point did you stop looking for a single explanation, if you did?
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Character and perspective

- 01 Which point of view did you trust most, and why?
 - 02 Which character changed most in your understanding across the book: Faith, Simon, Alex, or John?
 - 03 How does the multi-POV structure affect your sense of culpability, empathy, and uncertainty?
 - 04 How does Ruby's pain alter the reader's understanding of her choices without reducing her to a diagnosis or a symptom?
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Family, grief, and marriage

- 01 Faith and Simon respond to Ruby's death in radically different ways. Which response felt more understandable to you, and where did each become ethically troubling?
 - 02 How does grief change what each parent can see, and what each refuses to see?
 - 03 What role does Pearl play in the novel's moral atmosphere, especially as a witness to adult breakdown and surviving family life?
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Ideas and responsibility

- 01 The novel asks whether language about awakening and transformation can become combustible in the wrong context. Where do you think the book lands on that question?
 - 02 Is John morally responsible for how his ideas are received, even if he did not intend harm?
 - 03 What does the novel suggest about the gap between what a speaker means and what a listener hears?
 - 04 Do you read the festival as a sincere but unsafe experiment, a negligent system, a spiritually confused project, or something else?
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Law, religion, and public narrative

- 01 What does the courtroom add that family grief, media discourse, and philosophy cannot provide?
- 02 What does the courtroom fail to capture?

- 03 How does the novel portray Christianity: as consolation, structure, distortion, community, moral language, or all of these at once?
 - 04 How do online posts and public accusations shape the tragedy into a more usable story, and what is lost in that process?
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Form and craft

- 01 The chapter titles move through philosophical and legal language as well as emotional states. How did that framing affect your reading experience?
 - 02 How does the novel balance thriller momentum with reflective, intellectual, and spiritual material?
 - 03 Where did the book feel most like literary fiction, and where did it feel most like a courtroom or moral thriller?
 - 04 What scenes stayed most strongly in the body after reading?
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Ending and aftermath

- 01 The later parts of the book turn toward walking the ground again, shared reckoning, and guarding dialogos. How did you interpret that movement?
- 02 Does the novel offer resolution, or does it offer a different form of attention?
- 03 What does seeing more finally come to mean by the end of the novel?

Themed sessions

Three threads that can carry a whole meeting on their own, each with its own way into the book.

Grief and family

The novel tracks how one catastrophe fractures family and community, then keeps asking whether love without truth can really heal anything. Faith and Simon's grief pulls them in opposite directions, public blame and legal analysis, while Pearl, June, Fox's parents, and the wider church community show how people around them absorb, resist, or rewrite the same loss.

- 01 How do different characters' grief shape what they are able, and unable, to see about Ruby, Charlotte, and Fox?
 - 02 Where does family love protect, and where does it distort or weaponise the truth?
 - 03 How does the book treat the tension between private mourning and public storytelling: funerals, posts, church, media?
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Law and ethics

Courtroom chapters and police procedures turn the tragedy into a legal narrative, showing how evidence, expert testimony, and institutional responsibility can both clarify and flatten lived complexity. The book uses *voir dire*, *Meaning on Trial*, and *When Everything Becomes Relevant* to explore negligence, foreseeability, incitement, and the ethics of running spiritually intense events for vulnerable teens at a dangerous site.

- 01 What kinds of responsibility does the novel place on parents, festival organisers, and public thinkers like John, and how do those responsibilities conflict?
- 02 How does the legal frame help, and how does it fail, when trying to honour the dead and protect the living?
- 03 In what ways does the courtroom create its own story that may not match what actually happened at the cliff or in the families' lives?

Philosophy and spirituality

Across sections such as The Question of Meaning, Seeing the Cost, Becoming Reflexive Animals, A Truth That Hurts and Heals, and Guarding Dialogos, the novel treats the meaning crisis as something lived in bodies, pain, church life, and teenage hunger for significance. It shows how language about awakening, thresholds, altered states, and letting the old self die can be received very differently by adolescents, grieving parents, and academics in cognitive science and theology.

- 01 How do the book's philosophical ideas (meaning crisis, relevance realisation, awakening, altered states) interact with the concrete lives of Ruby, Charlotte, Fox, Faith, Simon, Alex, and John?
- 02 Where does spiritual or philosophical language genuinely help characters live more truthfully, and where does it become combustible or dangerous?
- 03 What does seeing more come to mean by the end of the novel: for individuals, for institutions, and for any shared attempt to live in contact with reality?

For groups with a particular interest

GROUPS INTERESTED IN ETHICS

When does care become control, and when does freedom become negligence?

What is the ethical burden of inviting vulnerable people into liminal or transformative spaces?

Can a person honour the dead while still resisting the stories grief wants to impose on them?

GROUPS INTERESTED IN PHILOSOPHY AND SPIRITUALITY

How does the novel dramatise relevance, salience, and the meaning crisis through concrete lives rather than abstract theory?

What is the difference between transformation held by practice and community, and transformation pursued as intensity or rupture?

What does the novel suggest about awe: is it healing, dangerous, morally neutral, or context-dependent?

GROUPS INTERESTED IN CRAFT

How does the novel use recurring objects such as the iPad, clothing, church material, legal files, and photographs to carry emotional meaning across perspectives?

In what ways does the manuscript turn evidence into story and story back into evidence?

How does the book stage revelation: through testimony, memory, media, dialogue, and physical return to place?

A suggested session format

10 min

First impressions and emotional response.

20 min Character and relationship discussion, especially Faith, Simon, Alex, John, and Ruby.

20 min Theme discussion focused on grief, meaning, responsibility, and institutions.

15 min The ending, unresolved questions, and what the title means after finishing the novel.

For deeper groups, a second session could focus only on the courtroom chapters and the final return to place, since those later sections reframe much of what came before.

NOTES FOR FACILITATORS

The novel includes sustained material related to teenage death, grief, chronic pain, suicidal interpretation, spiritual vulnerability, family conflict, legal conflict, and public blame. Groups may benefit from naming these topics at the beginning so readers can participate with care rather than surprise.

It may also help to keep discussion anchored in the novel's central discipline: resisting premature simplification. The book's power lies less in solving the tragedy than in showing how different people live inside incompatible but partly true frames of meaning.

Australian crisis support, and guidance for readers with lived experience

A CLOSING QUESTION FOR ANY GROUP

What would it mean, in your own life, to see more without turning other people's suffering into a theory, a verdict, or a story that serves your needs better than theirs?

Reader resources · **Meet the characters**
