

BOOK CLUB KIT

MEN LIKE US



A NOVEL

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 Of the Kennedys, JFK is the best known, and the only one to be president. Why do you think the author chose to make Bobby the protagonist? What vantage point does he have that his more famous brother might not? What other characters might make interesting protagonists?
- 2 Throughout the novel, Bobby makes a distinction between himself and “The Campaign Manager” or between Jack, his brother, and Jack, “The Candidate.” How does this way of splitting identities function for the characters? In what ways might it serve as compartmentalization versus performance? How do these different versions of Bobby, Jack, and others interact, and what does that suggest about whether a person can be separated into distinct roles?
- 3 As the seventh of nine children and with a deeply ingrained loyalty to family, Bobby seemingly has no choice but to support his father’s political ambitions and reshape himself to help Jack. The conflict between individuality and family expectation is one Bobby contends with over and over again. How does he navigate the tension between individuality and family expectation? What factors seem to drive his ultimate decision to support Jack? Do you think this is the right choice? Do you think Bobby’s ability to reshape himself—something a character like Ted, treated as a family joke, isn’t able to do as effectively—is a good thing or a bad thing? How do Bobby’s motivations—whether tied to his brother, his father, or himself—evolve over time?
- 4 The idea of fate and destiny come up throughout the book. At an early dinner with Senator McCarthy, McCarthy insists that there’s no such thing as luck, “Only shaping destiny with your own two hands,” to which Jack responds, “Is that it? Or does destiny produce the man for the hour?” (Page 60). Later, looking for Sputnik, Bobby looks at the stars and wonders, “If our fates are written up there, might we not send a satellite to change them?” (Page 240). Given what we know about the Kennedys—and how Bobby’s story ends—how do you think fate and destiny play a role in this story? The ancient Greeks believed that character is destiny. What role does character have in shaping either of these forces, if at all, within the story?
- 5 Despite his constant scheming and ruthless political machinations, Bobby’s father, Joe Kennedy (“The Ambassador”), occasionally shows a softer side. Do you think his stage managing of his children’s lives—such as pushing Jack and Bobby into politics—is overbearing, or a way of pushing them to achieve more than they would if left to their own devices? What about more direct, negative interferences, such as forcing Ted to get married, or lobotomizing Rosemary—can it still be said that he acts out of love? How do his decisions—both supportive and harmful—shape the family dynamic and legacy? How does he compare to other patriarchs of notable American dynasties, whether political or otherwise?
- 6 It’s been written of JFK and RFK that John Kennedy was “the realist who pretended to be an idealist” and Robert Kennedy was the “idealist who pretended to be a realist.” In what ways does this characterization appear in the novel? How do pragmatism and idealism shape their decisions and public personas? How do you think these traits influence the broader arc of the Kennedy story?

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- 7 Among people who knew the Kennedys, Eunice was considered to be the best politician among the siblings, her brothers included, and many believed that if it had been a later generation, Eunice would have been the president, not Jack. Yet she's passed over to run Jack's initial Senate campaign in favor of Bobby. How does the novel explore the idea of sibling rivalry through her character? In what ways does her experience reflect broader ideas about gender, power, and recognition? Have you experienced similar moments of sibling rivalry? Later in the story, after a conversation with Eleanor Roosevelt, she broaches the idea of running for office herself and Bobby reacts negatively. How did you feel when he shut her down? What does this tell us about his character?
- 8 At the beginning of the book, Bobby recalls a childhood story about himself in which he jumped off the boat, and seems to believe that his father thought he was "a brainless boy merrily trying to drown himself." (Page 9). Later, when the Ambassador tells the same story, he says, "But you dove straight into the water. Not afraid. Tough as anything. 'He's a Kennedy alright,' I said." (Page 281). Do you think revision is a natural part of memory and storytelling in families, or is this a more deliberate choice, as Bobby suspects? How do the Kennedys actively construct stories about themselves in the book? How have we revised our opinions of the Kennedys now from the initial idea of "Camelot?" In what ways do you think our view of them might continue to change down the road?
- 9 Bobby's relationship with Jackie develops from an initial wariness (and Jackie's seeming distaste for the Kennedy siblings) to a close friendship, to the point that it's Bobby at her bedside when Jackie has a stillbirth instead of Jack. How does their connection develop, and what factors contribute to its depth? In what ways does their relationship intersect with Jack's role in their lives? What do you think draws them to each other, or what does their relationship with each other provide that they don't get with other characters?
- 10 Near the end of the book, Jack tells Bobby, "You always choose the rest of us. And the rest of us always choose ourselves." (page 291). Do you think this is true? In what ways does Bobby choose his family or his siblings? In what ways does he choose himself? How do other characters balance self-interest and family loyalty?
- 11 The paradox of Theseus's ship asks if you replace every part of a ship one by one until none of the original parts remain, is it still the same ship? Or if not, at what point does it become another ship? How does this idea apply to Bobby's transformation over the course of the novel? Does part of the original Bobby survive to the end, or there a point at which he becomes a completely different "ship" to commit to Jack? At what point, if any, does he seem like a fundamentally different version of himself?
- 12 Throughout the book, Bobby and his siblings have various ideas about what being a Kennedy means. What do you think it means? How do you think of them, or how do you think they're remembered in our collective memory? How did you think of them growing up, and has your opinion changed now?