

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Sarah Hepola writes that while books about alcoholism often refer to the “hidden drinking” of women, there was little hidden about the way women around her drank. “It was a requirement for work events and formal festivities. Let’s not even mention the word ‘bachelorette.’” Has this been your experience as well? Do you think the role of alcohol at gatherings—of friends, of colleagues, at celebrations—has changed in your lifetime, particularly with women? Does society have different expectations for what constitutes appropriate drinking for men than for women?
2. *Blackout* explores the way drinking impacted Hepola’s ability to give sexual consent. She writes: “In my life, alcohol often made the issue of consent very murky. More like an ink spill and nothing close to a clear line . . . “Sex was a complicated bargain to me. It was chase, and it was hunt. It was hide and seek, clash and surrender, and the pendulum could swing inside my brain all night: I will, no I won’t; I should, no I can’t. I drank to drown those voices, because I wanted the bravado of a sexually liberated woman. I wanted the same

freedom from internal conflict my male friends seemed to enjoy. So I drank myself to a place where I didn't care, but I woke up a person who cared enormously. Many yes's on Friday nights would have been no's on Saturday morning. My consent battle was in me." How do you feel about those words? Do you think someone who has had a lot to drink is capable of giving real sexual consent? Is it a murky issue for you, or one that is well-defined?

3. *Blackout* is infused with wit and humor. Did this approach make Hepola's story more accessible? Have you read other memoirs about the same subject that aren't funny? Discuss the effectiveness of each.
4. Hepola's many girlfriends are alternately supportive, enabling, exasperated, confrontational, and present for her. Of course, Sarah revealed the truth of her life very carefully, dividing her "confessions among close friends but never leaving any one person doused with too much truth." She also notes that "some recovering alcoholics believe you need to distance yourself from your old friends. They're triggers and bad influences. But what if your friends were the ones who saved you? What if your friends were the ones who noticed when you disappeared, who rummaged around their own insides until they could find a compassionate way to say: *Enough*. Was I supposed to cut them out now?" What did you think about Hepola's friendships? Have you ever had to confront a friend about a behavior you found worrisome? Have you ever had to deliberately end a friendship, or choose to sustain one through a difficult time?

5. Do you drink? Why or why not? Have you ever had troubling experiences with alcohol?
6. The second half of *Blackout* follows Hepola's journey through recovery, and through learning how to redefine her life without alcohol. Have you ever had to reinvent yourself? Was it painful, or exciting, or both? Discuss.
7. In trying to date sober, Hepola confronts a culture where so many boundaries have been torn down by alcohol and the Internet. Do you think modern technology has enabled too much false intimacy? If so, what can be done about it? How do single women navigate a dating landscape where sex is so readily available and yet meaningful relationships can be so hard to come by?
8. Hepola writes that she and her female friends drank alcohol, in part, to shut down "the jackhammers of our perfectionism." Do you struggle with perfectionism? How does it manifest, and have you found ways (other than alcohol) to push through those issues?
9. About finding happiness, Hepola writes, "In the old days, a heroine in search of happiness lost weight and found a prince. But current wisdom dictates a heroine in search of happiness should ditch the prince, skip the diet—and gain acceptance. Stop changing yourself to please the world, and start finding happiness within. That's a good message, given all the ways women are knocked around by the beauty-industrial complex. But my problem wasn't a deficit

of acceptance. It was too much. I drank however I wanted, and I accepted the nights that slipped away from me. I ate however I wanted, and I accepted my body was a home I'd never want to claim as my own . . . I wondered if I could use a little less acceptance around here. Or, to be more precise: Acceptance was only half the equation. The other half was determining what was unacceptable—and changing that.”

Do agree? If so, what areas in your own life would you like to better accept? Are there areas you are trying to change?

SARAH HEPOLA'S BOOKSHELF

I had dinner with a friend around the time I had finally gathered the courage to tell people I was “writing a book. A memoir maybe.” She had also written books—in the pre-dawn before her children woke, a dedication which still boggles my mind—and she made a great suggestion that night. Choose five books you want your book to resemble and keep them on your nightstand. Read them, study them, reach for them when you need guidance. I’ve always had trouble sticking to my share. I chose six.

DRINKING: A LOVE STORY

Caroline Knapp’s 1996 memoir about falling in love with alcohol—and needing to end that love affair—is the gold standard of drinking stories for me. I spent a lot of time studying the book just to figure out what I could say that Knapp had not already. So much is there: The complicated way alcohol intersects with love and sex and self-worth. I also admire the way Knapp writes about her family (her father was a well-regarded psychiatrist), so that I could see the conflict but sense the devotion underneath. Ultimately what I tried to do was bring the story of the female drinker into a new century, one in which so many women

continue to look for confidence, comfort, and sexual freedom in a glass.

DIFFERENT SEASONS

When I was 12, I read this book so many times I had to buy a new copy. My original cleaved into three parts, a victim of obsessive reading. The 1982 book gathers four novellas written by Stephen King, including my favorite “The Body” (basis for the movie *Stand By Me*), about a group of 13-year-old boys who venture into the Maine woods to find a missing kid. Although the tale has flickers of violence and gore, it’s a story about friendship—the entwined, sometimes flinty friendships between kids old enough to see how the world works but not old enough to do anything about it. It’s also the story of a young writer’s creative evolution, and more than any other book, this one implanted in me the notion that I could do this one day. I hadn’t read the story in more than two decades when I picked it up again while I was working on *Blackout*, opening those familiar pages like an old love letter whose magic I was afraid to scatter. I shouldn’t have worried. It utterly charmed me again. And I saw little phrases, rhetoric flourishes, and ideas that I’ve used for years, not remembering where they came from. This book is burned on my brain. I used to carry the opening passage around with me like a lucky charm. *“The most important things are the hardest things to say. They are the things you get ashamed of, because words diminish them.”* The whole tale felt so personal, as though it had been written for me.

SEX, DRUGS AND COCOA PUFFS

Whenever I read vintage Chuck Klosterman, I feel like I just had a very deep conversation with the stoner at the party who, let's say, explained my entire childhood through the philosophy of Top 40 lyrics. Though he's gone on to write novels and expound on ethics, Klosterman is the master of the pop-culture riff. The essays from this 2003 collection are funny, galling, endlessly entertaining. He understood that for his generation, movies and music and television were like a second language, one which could be just as intimate as their first. I spent too much of my 20s wishing I were Milan Kundera—some serious-minded author penning big-idea books about the human condition—but Klosterman presented me with a new kind of literary folk hero. He wrote about junk food and Billy Joel and reality television. His work and his popularity are a testament to that old saw: *Write what you know.*

TINY BEAUTIFUL THINGS

I've given Cheryl Strayed's collection of advice columns to more than half a dozen friends. I hand out those books like I once distributed liquor bottles. Going through a hard time? *Read this.* The columns were published on the website *The Rumpus* (under the pen name "Sugar") starting in 2010, before Strayed's 2012 memoir "Wild" made her a literary superstar, but what emerges through their pages is a kind of alternate memoir. As Strayed counsels people through their low moments—the end of a relationship, the loss of a child—we learn about her own past. Her mother's death, her early literary stumbles, how she fell in love

with her husband. Her writing is propulsive, funny-sad, and gorgeously big-hearted. Too often the Internet can feel like a sprawling subdivision of knee-jerk judgment, but her approach is radically sincere. She dares to take a stranger's hand and hold it for a while.

THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

One of the best books about memory, and being haunted by memory, that I've ever come across. I read this 1990 novel when I was in college, and the beauty and the mystery of O'Brien's language was a revelation. I had no idea a writer could play with narrative like this, keeping the reader guessing about what was real and what was fiction. I had no idea I could sympathize with a guy sent to Vietnam. Until then, I thought of war books the way I thought of Westerns or Monday Night Football: Boring stuff for boys. But we all fight our own wars, and O'Brien's takes him to the edge of human experience, where he keeps himself sane the same way so many of us have—telling himself stories in the dark.

THE BIG BOOK

The last half of *The Big Book* is a collection of short pieces about how people drank and how they got sober. It's a simple, profound collection, stretching over the past 75 years to show that there is no one story, and yet there is the same story, again and again. The pieces are written by debutantes and preachers and paupers and executives; this is rich human variety, many colors, many classes. I used to thumb through those tales and read one before I went to bed, just to give myself a shot of pure storytelling.

The first half of *The Big Book* is a collection of wisdom about how to live better. It's easy to recoil at the stilted language of 1939 or the era's gender stereotypes—the book is written with the assumption that all alcoholics are male—but a deeper reading reveals a timeless work that speaks to anyone trying to find balance in an imbalanced world. Avoid self-pity. Be useful to others. Admit when you're wrong. Stop trying to control the universe. Its primary author, Bill Wilson, was an eloquent man who struggled with his ego and his fidelity, long after he gave up the drink. In trying to navigate his own frailties, he managed to help millions of others. A common lament amongst the lost and hopeless is that life does not provide an instruction manual. True. But *The Big Book* comes close.