



SINKHOLE

A Legacy of Suicide

By Juliet
Patterson

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Discussion Questions

1. Early in her memoir, Patterson writes about the inheritance of suicide in her family: “After my father was gone and I felt his violent absence, I knew I needed to break open my family’s silence. Who were these men? What led to these deaths in my family? What did my family’s history of suicide imply? And what did it mean for my own future?” [10] Discuss the way these questions shape the book’s narrative. What role do questions in general play in this book?

2. In the opening chapters of *Sinkhole*, Patterson describes how she looks for meaning in signs and symbols. In chapter three, she describes seeing a flock of robins in the park where her father died and writes, “In the weeks that followed, I thought back to this moment and looked for meaning in the flock—whether it was dates or birds, I was living by symbols, the only language I seemed to understand.” [22] Discuss the symbols in the book you found to be particularly meaningful. What stood out to you and why? How much of your own life is guided by signs or symbols?

3. In chapter seven, Patterson picks up a trail of research into her maternal grandfather’s death, Edward Patterson, that her father left behind. In chapter ten, Patterson writes that she “believed Edward’s suicide was intricately connected to my father’s. I had a ruminative need to make sense of these deaths—to imagine, in the most accurate way, the last day of Edward’s life, a story that might somehow inform my future. Or better yet, inoculate it.” [76] How do you make sense of this? Discuss the imagined scenes Patterson uses in the book, including the opening of the book which describes her father on the night of his death by suicide. How did you respond to these scenes as a reader? What effect did they have on you in terms of knowing or understanding these men? Or the act of suicide itself? How do you think these scenes play against or work with the idea of “truth” in nonfiction or memoir?

4. In part two of the book, Patterson turns her attention to her parent’s hometown of Pittsburg, Kansas, exploring the social and economic history of the town. Once home to an extensive coal mining industry, Pittsburg is now riddled with underground mines and sinkholes, a fact that provides the book’s title and central metaphor. Reflect on the extractive practices discussed in Pittsburg’s history and its impact on the environment, economy and social well-being of the town’s inhabitants. What kinds of connections do you see between these aspects of the town?

5. Patterson writes of the women in her family: “Even if I didn’t always understand their stoicism, I could see now their inner strength, their will to go on.” [202] Discuss aspects of survivorship and the women in *Sinkhole*.

6. At the end of the book, Patterson reflects on her role as a parent and writes, “I’ve been reshaped by a deep allegiance to the future, which changes my view of life itself.” [216] What does this mean to you? Reflect on your own relationship to time: to the past, present and future. Has reading *Sinkhole* caused you to think about your own relationship to aspects of time?

7. Did *Sinkhole* change the way you think about suicide? Did it change the way you think about suicide within the context of American culture?

8. What was one thing that surprised you while reading *Sinkhole*?

9. If you were going to tell someone about this book, what would you say? Who are the types of people you would recommend this book to?

