

# BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE



1. Do you think a person could survive a fourteen-story fall? Discuss cases of miraculous survival that the media has covered. How do you think such a thing would affect your own life?
2. What is your perception of Penny as a dancer? Do you think she has what it takes to make it in a performance career? Why or why not?
3. Evelyn clearly believed in her daughter from a young age and provided Penny with the special training she needed to succeed in her field. What other endeavors require a similar focus? Compare and contrast the risks of focused training and generalized education in today's society.
4. After Angela's previous roommate dies, she tells Penny that the woman "just couldn't hang on any longer." How much power do you believe we can have over our own deaths? Discuss experiences you have had with dying people who seemed to "let go."
5. Penny thinks she has walked a safe line between "low calorie" and "nutritionally healthy." Do you think Penny has an eating disorder? Why or why not? How would you define "eating disorder"?
6. Penny says, "Restricting was the closest feeling I'd ever had to self-love." What do you think she meant by that? How is restricting also like self-hate?
7. Each of the novel's characters has a different notion about the relationship between eating and body image. In this regard, compare and contrast Penny, Bebe, Evelyn, Margaret MacArthur, Angela, and Kandelbaum. With which of these characters do your thoughts and/or influences align regarding the limitations of your body? Do these thoughts help or hinder you? Have your thoughts changed over time?
8. Discuss how Penny's developing body image was influenced by her mother, her father, miss Judith, and Bebe.
9. Laura MacArthur was told outright that she had to lose weight to be in the company. In Penny's case, was the pressure to be thin from the dance world, or from within Penny? In what way does our society at large send signals to all women about the ideal body image? Have you ever felt pressure—at work, at school, or at home—to have a body that was different in a significant way than yours? How did you deal with it?

# THE ART OF FALLING

10. Penny describes the scale as “my partner in crime, my lover, and my nemesis.” What does this mean? Do you have a relationship with the scale? If yes, what is it, and does it influence your day-to-day lifestyle?
11. Angela and Kandelbaum are Penny’s first friends outside the dance world. Why is this significant? What drew the three of them into such a fast friendship? What were they able to give to one another?
12. Discuss the structure of the novel. How did the author use the opening situation to raise the two questions that drive the novel’s interweaving story lines? Was the technique effective in drawing the novel to a satisfactory conclusion?
13. While reading, when did you first suspect Penny might have tried to kill herself? Now that you’ve finished the book, do you still think Penny tried to commit suicide? Why or why not?
14. In the psych ward, Penny says, “Just because I suffered traumatic memory loss didn’t mean I was out of my mind. If anything, I was out of my body.” What do you think she means by this?
15. Is Dmitri a villain? In what ways did he support Penny’s dream, and in what ways did he hinder her? And when he put his own interests first—was that a bad thing? Whose fault was it that she had to part ways with the company?
16. Penny says, “My passion for dance and my passion for Dmitri could no longer be separated; I didn’t know where one ended and the other began.” Explain what that means and how this issue is related to her relationships with her mother and her own body.
17. Discuss the role that muscle memory plays in Penny’s healing. Have you ever experienced a time when your muscles seemingly remembered something your brain had forgotten?
18. Discuss the concept of space as a dancer’s partner. What role does “space” play in other arts: Visual? Architecture? Music? Literature?
19. How was Evelyn’s weight a metaphor in her relationship with Penny? Why was their relationship so strained, and when did it start to heal?
20. Compare and contrast Kandelbaum and Penny in terms of faith and other kinds of support. Do you think Kandelbaum would have considered suicide if he was left on his own after losing Angela? Was Penny able to set a foundation of faith that she could rely upon in the future?

# THE ART OF FALLING

21. Penny and Angela discuss a wrestling match between body and soul at death's doorstep. Compare Angela's death with what Penny remembers of her actions before the fall. Are body and soul separate entities, or are they inextricably interwoven?
22. Compare the Penelope Sparrow who moved to New York to start auditioning to the same character at the end. How has she changed? Name a few of the major turning points that stick out to you.
23. What is Penny hoping to accomplish with Real People Dance? Do you think the world will accept them? In what ways is America's tolerance for individual body differences and intolerance for unhealthy lifestyles becoming more apparent?
24. Were you surprised that Penny hires her mother as musical director for the new company? Do you think they'll be able to work together? What has changed about their relationship?
25. What do you think Penny's life will be like after the close of the book? In what ways will it be different from the career she envisioned as a child, and in what ways will it differ from her experience with Dance DeLaval? If she and Dmitri meet again, what do you think that would be like?

## BONUS QUESTIONS

There are twenty-five questions in the back of the book, but here are a few bonus questions you might like just as well.

1. Did you trust Penelope as the narrator?
2. When she said in the psych ward, "The conversation I needed to re-establish was neuromuscular," what do you think she meant? Do you think she was right about that as being key to her healing?
3. One of the first things people said about you as a baby was undoubtedly, "You look just like your mother (or father)." Discuss the relationship between what Penny thinks of her mother's body and what she thinks of her own. Were comparisons to your own parents problematic for you? Why?
4. On p. 53, Evelyn says Penny "deserves" a place on her wall. Do you think people "deserve" success? Did Penny? Why or why not?
5. On p. 191, Kandelbaum talks about what the world would be like if our bodies were all the same. What additional thoughts do you have about the importance of our differences?