

"A heartfelt and exciting debut." —TAYLOR JENKINS REID

# Must *a novel* Love Books

An illustration of a person with dark curly hair, wearing a black top and dark pants, sitting on the floor and reading an open book. The person is surrounded by several floating books in various colors (blue, purple, teal) and orientations. The background is a solid red color.

**SHAUNA ROBINSON**

# READING GROUP GUIDE

1. After five years in a dead-end job, Nora feels trapped and desperate. Have you ever found yourself in a similar position? How did you get out of it?
2. How would you characterize Andrew? What motivates him?
3. Nora's choice to freelance for Weber is a morally ambiguous one. Put yourself in her shoes—overworked, underpaid, and unable to pay rent. What would you choose to do?
4. Beth and Nora meet at Parsons on their first day and hit it off immediately. What makes them such good friends? Outline their similarities and differences.
5. Despite her attraction to him, why does Nora feel so conflicted about starting a relationship with Andrew?
6. Eric, Julie, and Kelly each take different paths before ending up at Parsons. What does this tell you about dream jobs?

7. Name the qualities Nora looks for in a job. Discuss other roles that would suit her.
8. Nora and Andrew rate themselves on the “Happiness Scale.” What would you rate yourself on the scale and why?
9. By the end of the book, what does Nora learn about the ever-elusive “dream job”?
10. What do you think is next for Nora?

# A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

**When did you decide to write this story?**

I got the idea for this book in 2015. By that point I'd been working at a publishing company for three years. At the time, though, the idea had nothing to do with publishing—it was just a flash of a thought about what might happen if a lowly assistant's first introduction to someone she needed to impress was getting their sandwich order wrong. The other details slowly trickled in from there. I set it in publishing because that was the industry I worked in, and I was too lazy to think up another. And because I felt so lost about my career, I'd wished there were more stories about people trying to figure out what they wanted to do with their lives. That lost feeling ended up making its way into the book too.

**By unpacking the myth of the “dream job,” this story explores happiness as a fluid, ever-changing thing. What did your path look like?**

Out of college, I spent a year as a receptionist at a publishing company, waiting for an editorial assistant position to open up. I was sure that once I was an editorial assistant—the dreamiest dream

job I could imagine—everything would be perfect. And, briefly, it was. Not long after getting the editorial assistant job, I was talking to one of my bosses about how we'd rate ourselves in happiness, and I rated my happiness an eight out of ten. I said I'd be a nine if I had a dog, and a ten if I had a house. (This is an answer someone gives in the book, and I definitely stole it from my past self!)

A few short weeks later, I went to my first conference, hated it, and realized this wasn't the career for me. But my happiness didn't really take a hit. I loved my coworkers so much that I imagined I'd be content to continue working there until I figured it out. But when layoffs hit the company and took some of my favorite coworkers with them, I was left feeling helpless and uncertain. I don't know what I would have rated my happiness then, but it was a long, slow burn of discontent for the next two years, to the point where I eventually quit my job and moved across the country to sleep on my best friend's couch.

Since then, I've had to stop thinking of happiness as something that can be achieved by obtaining what you want. Now, I see happiness as an ongoing fight. I know now that you can get what you want and still be unhappy, which is an odd, disappointing feeling. But it makes me feel a little less helpless to think of happiness as something you work toward, not something you achieve. (But I am pleased to say I do have a dog now! He does not automatically bump up my happiness permanently, but he is very cute.)

**As someone who now has experience on both sides of publishing—as a publishing professional to a published author—how do you reconcile those experiences?**

It's funny that this book I wrote, about an editorial assistant who

is often annoyed by authors, ended up putting me in that author role on the other side of the looking glass. I try to be an easygoing, unflappable author, because those were my favorite to work with. I've also taken great care to meet each and every deadline, because I would not be able to handle missing a deadline for a book in which the protagonist complains about authors constantly missing deadlines. I understand that missing deadlines is par for the course sometimes, but I just could not do it for this book!

**What are your go-to books?**

*A Tale for the Time Being* by Ruth Ozeki is a favorite for the way it covers serious subjects very thoughtfully. I can also never resist humor—I read *Good Omens* by Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman for the first time a few years ago, and it's become something I keep returning to. *Heads of the Colored People* by Nafissa Thompson-Spires was an instant favorite for the way it manages to be both poignant and darkly funny.

**Andrew jokes that Nora “ruins books” for him, because she knows too much of what goes on behind the scenes in publishing. Did you find that this happened to you when you worked in the industry? Do you still feel that way?**

I do! There is, to be a fair, a magic in it, too. It's exciting to see a manuscript go from words in a document to something beautifully laid out and bound. But my experience has led me to accept that publishing is a business with flaws like any other.

**Writing a book is a huge undertaking. For you, what was the most difficult part?**

The delusion it takes to believe your writing will amount to

anything is mind-boggling. Most days I doubted anything would come of it, which enabled me to go months at a time without writing. It became easier when I got further along into writing the story, because by that point it became more about wanting to finish what I started than caring whether it ever actually became a book. But those first 20,000 words or so felt like fruitless fumbling. It took me two years to write that first 20,000 words and much less time to write the remaining 60,000.

**Some people need to write a little bit every day, others work best in marathon writing sessions... Can you talk a little bit about your process?**

Consistency is crucial for me. It's so easy to put something off, especially when you're not sure where your story is going next or you don't see a point to writing. My writing for this book wasn't consistent until I set a daily word count goal for myself. Even when I didn't know what I was going to write next, I still had to write something to meet my count. Just getting something on the page helped get the ideas flowing from there.

Logging my word count in an Excel sheet and seeing the numbers progress every day is very motivating, but what I've found even more motivating is putting stickers in my planner if I meet my word count (which, in turn, inspired the sticker scene in the book!).

**Nora ultimately learns that she has to try on different jobs for size before finding the right one. Do you have any other advice for people struggling to find the right career path?**

I'm still learning myself! I'm not even sure there is a "right" job or career path for everyone, just some jobs that are more

tolerable than others. I, personally, would like a job that involves living in a remote cabin and speaking to no one, but unfortunately no employer has been willing to offer me this position.

I also think it's important to keep in mind that your job is not your identity. Your job does not define you, and it is not a measure of all the skills or abilities you possess. You can always find fulfillment by pursuing your passions outside of work.

**San Francisco plays such a large role in this story. Why did you choose it as the setting for Nora's story?**

The Bay Area is a beautiful, unique, eclectic region, and I've missed it deeply since moving to the East Coast. But my main reason for setting my novel there is, truthfully, laziness. I worked in San Francisco at the time, and writing about a city I'm intimately familiar with is easier than researching a city I know less about.

It also presented an opportunity to showcase a different side of publishing. So many big publishing players are based in New York. A publishing house in San Francisco, surrounded by tech start-ups galore, has a fish-out-of-water feel that captured my experience at the time.

**Nora's story ends on an ambiguous note, but do you secretly have an idea of where she'll end up?**

Not really! I think she'll have to keep trying different careers to find something she likes. It may not be the second, third, or fourth job she tries, but she will keep trying. I think she'll learn how to cope with the creature in her head in a healthier way. And as she works toward finding happiness and finding her path, I like to imagine Andrew is by her side all the while, roll of stickers in hand.