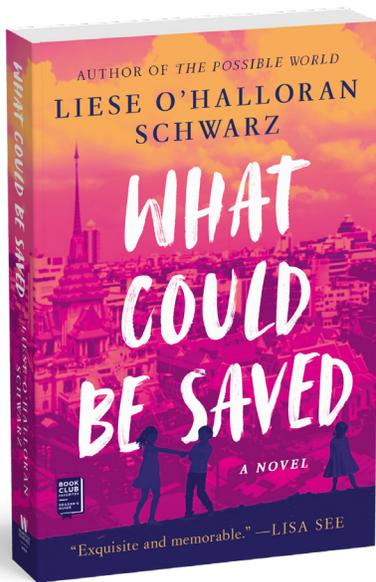


LIESE O'HALLORAN
SCHWARZ

WHAT
COULD
BE SAVED

A NOVEL

BOOK CLUB KIT



This reading group guide for *What Could Be Saved* includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Liese O'Halloran Schwarz. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

Introduction

Fifty-two-year-old reclusive artist Laura Preston is at a crossroads personally and professionally—her painting career has stalled, her boyfriend has asked her to marry him—when she is contacted by a stranger who claims to be her brother. Decades earlier, eight-year-old Philip disappeared while the Preston family lived in Bangkok. Older sister Beatrice dismisses it as a scam, but Laura ignores her warnings and flies to Thailand to find out if it could be true. But meeting the man who claims to be Philip in person leads to more questions than answers.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Sisters Beatrice and Laura react very differently to the news that their long-lost brother may have been found. Why do you think that is? What are the roots of the strain between the sisters? Do you relate more to Beatrice or to Laura?
2. In the beginning of the book, Laura has been experiencing an artistic block, unable to move on from a series of paintings called the “Ghost Pictures.” Who or what do you think the ghosts might represent?
3. Genevieve undergoes a striking transformation over the course of the book. As a young wife and mother in Bangkok, what were her primary motivations and concerns? In the second half of her life, how did those change? Do you think she became a fundamentally different person, or did she merely channel her energy into different causes? Did you find it strange that she devoted so much time to rescuing other people’s children while paying so little attention to her own?

4. Water is a recurring theme in the book—the khlongs, the swimming pool in the Prestons' garden, the river that runs past Noi's house. Do you think water represents the same thing each time it appears?
5. In chapter eight, Bardin tells Robert a story about an elderly woman who mysteriously dies in the middle of the night. Why do you think Bardin tells him this puzzling story? And why does it come back into Robert's mind just as he's facing his own mortality?
6. The Preston family's house servant Noi notes on page 370 that "although [she] was not much older than the Preston daughters, she had always felt the gap keenly." What made Noi grow up faster than Beatrice and Laura did? What role did Noi play in the lives of the Preston family? Did her role change over time?
7. Genevieve tells Beatrice on page 382, "You don't have to do the same things I do," and Beatrice says, "I know." How do you think Beatrice's choices, as she grows up, are different from her mother's? How are they similar?
8. "We're all still children....That never stops" is said by a character in the book (p. 235). Do you agree with that statement?
9. On page 399, Bea says to Laura, "you were what *could* be saved of our family." Bea could be speaking literally—their conversation is about measures Bea took to save her sister from a potential kidnapper. What else could Beatrice have meant by that statement?
10. At the annual luncheon to welcome "New Ladies" to the expatriate community, Genevieve is astonished that one of the newcomers is a man. What does this suggest about the ways American society is changing while she is in Bangkok? What else does she notice about the "New Ladies" that disturbs her?
11. When the Preston family returned to the US, they brought one of their servants, Noi. In the book we read about Noi's dreams, her love for her sister, her skills as a seamstress, her desire for a daughter. In bringing her back to America, did the Prestons help Noi fulfill an "American Dream"? Why or why not?
12. Philip is given a nickname by his martial-arts classmates: Nitnoy. At first he rejects it, but later on he embraces it. Why do you think he does that?
13. Compare Robert's final moments of consciousness (p. 363) to Genevieve's experience of dementia. Do they share certain qualities? How does Genevieve's dementia allow her a freedom she never had in her former life? What has her illness taken away from her, and what has it given to her?

- 14.** On page 327, Laura makes a point of replaying in her mind the scene of the car being lifted out of the pool, “so she could describe it perfectly for Philip when he came home....She memorized it so carefully...but then as the years went on she slowly forgot it all.” What does this suggest about the reliability of Laura’s memories of her own childhood? Do you think it’s possible for any of us to be able to recall our childhoods with accuracy? What is your earliest childhood memory? Can the stories we tell ourselves replace our actual memories?

Enhance Your Book Club

- 1.** The Emerald Buddha is mentioned by Genevieve at one point as “the most important Buddha in Thailand.” Research more about the Emerald Buddha’s origins. Why is it so significant?
- 2.** The Prestons left America in 1968, just as a giant cultural shift was about to take place. When they returned in 1972, the country was very different. One obvious change was in clothing (for both men and women). Find images of everyday American fashion in 1968 and 1972 and compare them. Some of those styles have since come back—do you own any of them?
- 3.** Many Thai people have “play names” (*chue len*)—short nicknames that are used almost exclusively in place of their formal names. Examples in the book are Moo (pig), Nok (bird), Noi (small). The play names are derived from some quality perceived in the child, or express something the parents hope will be a part of the child’s life. What would your own play name be? If you have children or siblings or a spouse, what play names might have been applied to each of them?



A CONVERSATION WITH Liese O'Halloran Schwarz

Q: Loss and deceit are recurring themes in this novel. Do you believe redemption is also a theme?

Liese: Yes, absolutely. In fact, the title expresses my general belief that there is something good that can be salvaged from any situation. My fundamental attitude to life might be characterized as informed optimism, meaning: although I am aware that truly horrible things happen all the time in the world, I believe in an essential underlying good. In 2020, when I am writing this, a pandemic is raging, with more than a million dead and no end in sight, and this particular aspect of *What Could Be Saved* seems especially pertinent. The story challenges the reader to look directly at terrible events and still see the beauty. There is beauty everywhere; I believe this strongly.

Q: This novel originates from a short story you wrote in your twenties. What was the original story about, and how did it evolve into *What Could Be Saved*?

Liese: The short story, titled “The Driver,” was one of my earliest forays into fiction—it was seventeen pages long and centered on a tiny episode recalled from my childhood in Bangkok: the firing of one of our drivers. Although so much about the characters and plot was fictional, it was precious to me. I always felt as though the short story could be much more, and over the years I tried to find what it needed to be. I expanded it to twenty pages, then forty, then into a novella, and although the nostalgia value stayed strong for me in every version, I could see that none of them were more than a sentimental exercise. I put it aside for a good while, and when I turned back to it in 2018, quite suddenly a critical plot element popped into my head (the disappearance of

Philip) that might allow the story of the Prestons in Bangkok to transcend nostalgia and become real fiction, rewarding to a reader. I started fresh, discarding most of what I had added to the original short piece, and after about a year I had a full draft of a book to work from.

Q: Why did you chose to write Genevieve’s character as having dementia? How was that meant to change the reader’s perception of her?

Liese: Perhaps some authors choose everything quite consciously when they write. For me, it isn’t that way—my conscious choices are made largely during revision. The drafting process is, for me, a very fluid experience of discovery in which the characters act almost on their own while I try to record it. I don’t get everything right in the first draft (understatement alert!)—so revision is where the majority of the work comes in. Thus, writing for me is two parts: first the joyous, free, almost magical experience of drafting, and then the grueling, painstaking process of revision, which offers its own joys as things come together. That’s a very long way of saying that Genevieve’s dementia arose as part of the free-drafting process, and it remained during revision because it fit. That a controlled, haunted person should lose not only her control but also all memory of the things that haunted her—I found it ironic and sad and also quite lovely. Genevieve was driven and deeply guilty. I wanted her to be happy. The only way she could come to happiness was to forget—and the only way she could forget was if she was forced to do so. Her dementia allowed her to choose her life, something she had not been able to do before then, and it also allowed her to enter into the past and enjoy things she had not enjoyed when she had experienced them the first time. Not only that, but making Genevieve descend from her “command post” in the family’s life pushed the spotlight, and the action, to the children (the next generation), as typically happens in families as the parents age. In short: when I began to write the “present-day” (2019) chapters, Genevieve cheerfully presented herself to me as a person with dementia in the first scene in which she appeared, and she stayed that way in revision because it worked with all of the rest of her story, and with the book as a whole.

Q: How did you decide on a nonlinear narrative? What are ways in which it uniquely influences the reader’s experience? The development of the story?

Liese: Unlike the free process of drafting, story structure for me is always a deliberate choice. I chose the alternating-timeline structure mainly to spotlight something I find very compelling: how we constantly build from the past. Our today is haunted by our yesterday—even by events that have been forgotten by all parties involved. I did consider making the book completely chronological for simplicity, but I dearly wanted to give the reader a privileged view, one which the characters in the book don’t have, by juxtaposing the now (when earlier events have grown cloudy in memory) with the *before* (when the events were clear). I also did briefly toy with the idea of opening the book

in Bangkok, and alternating the timelines from that point, but decided against that. I wanted 2019 to be the “home” timeline, so that Laura could carry the story into the future.

Q: Why did you choose to make sibling relationships the focal point of this novel?

Liese: I didn’t intend that, actually—it evolved as I revised. I have a brother and a sister, and as I grow older the specialness of the sibling relationship becomes more clear to me—who else in the world knows your family story, and you, so well? When I was young, our differences were paramount, and the age gaps between us seemed huge. Now we’re all basically the same age, and I look at us and can see how similar we are—and, yes, still how different. It seems to me that each of us experienced our own personal version of the same family. I find that fascinating. When I began to work with my editor, Peter Borland, something that he said made it clear that he saw this as a sibling book, and just like that, I saw it that way, too—and that understanding guided my subsequent revisions.

Q: What are similarities between medicine and poetry—two things you simultaneously pursued?

Liese: I wrote poetry from childhood until I was in medical school, when I switched to fiction. To my mind, writing poetry requires an extreme attention to detail. Every bit of punctuation, the sound (the music) of the words, even the negative space on the page—it all matters. The practice of medicine also requires enormous attention to detail—but with much more serious consequences for carelessness. There is also a lot of nuance to both. The diagnostic process in medicine is much like the deconstruction of a poem—a lot of decoding subtle clues, inferring what is unsaid, and appreciating subtext.

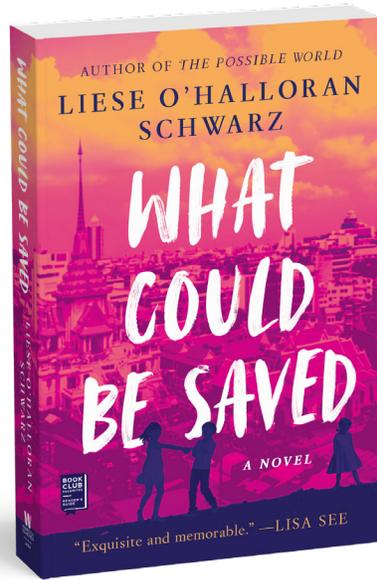
Q: Bea says to Laura, “you were what *could* be saved.” Who was the character most in need of being saved in your opinion?

Liese: Oh, that’s a difficult question. Each of them! All of them! We all deserve to be saved. But if I had to choose one from the story—perhaps Bea. She carried the burden of this whole family from childhood, without real gratitude from anyone. As I see it, by the time it is 2019 in the book, Beatrice has done her duty and done it very well, and she deserves to put the burden down and enjoy her life.

Q: Do you have any plans for future projects? Will you stick with literary fiction or would you consider nonfiction or even a return to poetry?

Liese: I do have projects in the works! I am not done with fiction—not by a long shot. Although I love poetry, and read nonfiction pretty voraciously, I want to continue creating fiction. I like to make up stories. I have always loved reading so much—I am so grateful to the many writers who have held me spellbound during my life, and it is

gorgeous to attempt to return the favor to other readers. Constructing a novel, telling a story properly, is incredibly difficult (and I love it). I want to write novels in perhaps the same way a mountaineer wants, or needs, to climb. It's madness! And amazing! It's difficult for long stretches and more than once the entire venture seems utter folly, but it is joyous, exhilarating work, and the summit is sweet beyond compare, and I will be quite happy if that is all I ever do.



Praise for *What Could Be Saved*

**“A delicious hybrid of mystery,
drama, and elegance.”**

—Jodi Picoult, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Spark of Light* and *Small Great Things*

“Exquisite and memorable.”

—Lisa See, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Tea Girl of Hummingbird Lane*

★ **“Superb...Schwarz is a remarkable storyteller.”**

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

**“Immersive, profoundly moving,
and gorgeously told.”**

—Laura Sims, author of *Looker*

“A rich, complex novel.”

—*Real Simple*, Top Picks

“Masterfully developed.”

—*Booklist*