

Lucy in Between

by Sarah Callender

Discussion Questions

Adult YA Book Clubs

A Note on These Questions

All three sets of questions are designed to open conversations, not close them. There are no right answers here—only honest ones. Each set includes optional connections to Pablo Neruda’s *The Book of Questions*, the collection of poems that winds through Lucy’s story. Neruda’s questions are unanswerable by design; they invite wonder rather than resolution. So do these.

Lucy in Between deals with loss, grief, suicide, mental health, family rupture, and the slow, uneven work of healing. Some questions may bring up personal feelings or memories. That’s okay. Communities—whether classrooms, families, or book clubs—grow closer when they make room for the hard and real alongside the beautiful.

A note on content: this novel depicts suicide and its aftermath with care and honesty. If any reader needs support, the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (call or text 988 in the US) is available 24/7.

Discussion Questions

Adult YA Book Clubs

For adults who love young adult literature—not because it’s simpler, but because it’s often braver. YA at its best goes straight at the things we’ve learned to talk around. These questions assume you’re willing to do that.

Craft & Voice

1. Callender’s debut is described as having a “poetic voice” alongside “searing prose”—a pairing that sounds almost contradictory. How do you think she holds those two registers together? Where in the novel does the language feel most alive to you, and where (if anywhere) does it strain?
2. The narrative is tightly focalized through Lucy’s thirteen-year-old consciousness, which means we only ever know what Lucy knows—including the gaps in her understanding. How does Callender use Lucy’s limited perspective as a craft tool? What does the reader come to understand that Lucy doesn’t, and how does that dramatic irony function emotionally?
3. Humor is one of this novel’s most distinctive and risky choices—deploying Lucy’s wit even in the darkest passages. Where do you think that tonal strategy works best? Is there anywhere it tips over into something uncomfortable for you? What is the argument for its presence throughout?
4. Publishers Weekly praises the novel for “eschewing easy answers for nuanced depictions of loss and its effects.” What specific narrative choices create that nuance? Think about what Callender leaves unresolved versus what she allows to shift.

Themes & Ideas

5. The novel is deeply interested in what it means to be seen—by a parent, a friend, a community—and what happens when you aren’t. Lucy’s invisibility within her

family feels almost structural, not just incidental. How does the failure of parental witness shape what Lucy seeks from Charles, from the bookstore owner, from Peru itself?

6. Henry's depression is never fully explained or decoded. Callender resists giving us—or Lucy—a tidy psychological account of why he couldn't go on. What do you make of that artistic choice? Is it an act of respect, an honest admission of what grief cannot resolve, or something else?
7. The novel suggests that people outside our family can sometimes save us in ways our families cannot. Is that a hopeful idea or a melancholic one—or both? What does it say about the limitations of love that is too close, too freighted with history?
8. Guilt is distributed strangely in this book—Lucy carries it, her mother carries it, and yet it never quite lands anywhere it belongs. How does Callender handle the ethics of guilt in the context of suicide loss? Does she let anyone off the hook?

Neruda & Poetry as Structure

9. Neruda's *The Book of Questions* works as more than atmosphere or allusion here—it functions almost as a structural spine, modeling a way of being with the unanswerable. How does the bookstore owner's role as "poetry pusher" change the novel's relationship to language itself? What is Callender saying about what poetry can do that narrative cannot?
10. Neruda's questions are often about the physical world—what color is the wind, where does the smoke go in winter. They make the abstract concrete. Where does Callender use a similar technique in her prose—grounding emotional abstraction in physical, sensory specificity? Find a passage that demonstrates this.

YA, Adulthood & What We Carry

11. Adults who love YA often say these books hit differently than adult literary fiction—closer to the bone, more willing to name the fear directly. Why do you think that is? What does *Lucy in Between* do that a comparable adult novel about grief and suicide might not?
12. The novel is pitched at ages 12–14 but carries weight that would challenge readers of any age. What do you believe young readers can hold that we sometimes

underestimate? Did reading this book change or confirm your sense of what literature for young people should be allowed to do?

13. By the end of *Lucy in Between*, Lucy has not arrived anywhere fixed or finished. She is still, as the title promises, in between. Where were you “in between” at thirteen? And where are you in between now—in your own life, your own grief, your own unanswerable questions? What does Neruda’s model of sitting with the question, rather than forcing the answer, offer you?