

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

BREATHING LESSONS

by Anne Tyler

- This novel takes place in one day. What effect does this time frame have on the story? Why do you think the author constructed the book this way? What day is it--what makes it significant? Why are emotions running high?
- Maggie's friend Serena is definitely a secondary character, but over the course of the novel, she comes up again and again. What kind of childhood did Serena have? What kind of marriage? What is her relationship to Maggie, and to Ira? Why is her character integral to this book?
- Did Ira do the right thing to take over his dad's business and assume the care of his sisters? Did he let himself be trapped? Should he have gone to med school? Ira's sisters are both, to a greater and lesser degree, mentally ill. How has their illness affected the family? How has it affected Ira and Maggie and their family life?
- Ira doesn't talk much--he plays solitaire, whistles, and when he does talk, he "tells the truth." Is his truth-telling appropriate or harmful? Is it more true or "right" than Maggie's little white lies and exaggerations?
- *Breathing Lessons* in some ways is a typical journey story, in which people set forth, have adventures, and end up with a new perspective. Maggie and Ira's journey is both physical and emotional. Where do they go? Whom do they encounter? What happens? Where do they end up?
- Did you find Maggie irritating or amusing? Do you think she is a nice person? Why did she never go to college? Do you think, as her daughter, Daisy, thinks, that Maggie is ordinary? Do you think, as her husband, Ira, does, that she behaves as if this is a practice life?
- This book is written in three parts. Why? How do the different parts function? Why does the second part exist?
- Mr. Otis tells a story about his dog Bessie, who couldn't fetch her ball when it landed on a chair--she would put her nose between the spindles and whine, never thinking to walk around to the front of the chair. "Blind in spots," says Mr. Otis. How and when does the image of spindles occur elsewhere in the novel?
- Although there are all sorts of instruction in life for driving and cooking and even breathing, there are few lessons on how to live life. People muddle along. What are the lessons you wish some of these characters had learned?
- The book opens with a funeral--a funeral that's also like a high school reunion, where Maggie and Ira see old friends and the toll age and death have taken on them. This is just the first loss we encounter in the book. What are other losses?



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- Maggie intercepts Fiona at an abortion clinic to talk her into having the baby. How does Maggie's opinion differ from those of the protesters outside the clinic? Is Maggie pro-choice or antiabortion, or can you tell? Why is her argument persuasive? Do you think Fiona would have gone through with the abortion if Maggie hadn't talked to her?
- Maggie has a habit of making things up--lying, you might say, or putting a "hopeful" spin on things. With her well-intended "exaggerations" or lies, she makes people do things that they otherwise might not have done. When are these little lies benign in the book? When do they have a more profound, even destructive result?
- Jesse and Fiona are very young when they marry. What are their expectations? What disappoints them? What breaks up the marriage? Could the marriage have been saved? Do you agree with Maggie that they still love each other?
- Maggie assumes that most people look at her marriage with envy and is surprised to hear otherwise. What does her marriage look like from the inside, from her point of view? How do you think Ira regards it? Jesse? Daisy? What does the marriage look like to you?
- By bedtime, Maggie and Ira have drawn close to each other and are more ready to embark together on a life without having children at home. Do you think that the day's events also served Leroy well? And the others--Serena, Mr. Otis, Fiona, Leroy-- do you think they are better off for their encounters with Ira and Maggie?