

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The Orphan's Daughter by Jan Cherubin

1. The Orphan's Daughter has two narrators—Joanna Aronson, the main narrator, and her father Clyde Aronson, who tells the story of his life in the orphanage. Do you think the orphanage story resonates with Joanna's story? How do the stories intersect?
2. In the novel, an inheritance means more than money. What do you think the inheritance symbolize for Joanna? For Evie? For Brenda?
3. Joanna's love for her father is fierce. Yet Clyde, at times, shows a reckless disregard for Joanna's wellbeing. Why is she so loyal to him?
4. How does Joanna's intense devotion to her father impact Brenda? Are you sympathetic to Brenda and her grievances?
5. Do you believe Clyde and Evie should have stayed together? Does Evie bear any responsibility for the breakup of their marriage?
6. Does Clyde's abandonment and childhood growing up in the Hebrew National Orphan Home explain his adult behavior?
7. Clyde has a larger-than-life personality. When you're with him you feel like you're in the center of the universe. This is an irresistible trait. Does it make up for his flaws?
8. Susan and Joanna are raised by their parents to be non-believers—Clyde says he's an existentialist and Evie still clings to Marxist ideals. Yet they send their children to Baltimore Hebrew Congregation for Sunday school. Why? The Aronsons' Jewishness is referenced in almost every chapter. If not religious belief, what gives each of these characters such a strong Jewish identity?
9. At the swimming club, Clyde asks Joanna to forgive him for what happened on the camping trip. Would you forgive a parent for this kind of betrayal? Is it possible for adult children to truly forgive their parents?
10. Would Joanna be better off if she cut ties with her father once she was out of the house?

11. When Clyde wakes up in terrible pain, Brenda insists he's faking. Clyde says the trouble with Brenda is that she's a *shiksa*. A Jewish wife would dote on him. Why does he reduce his relationship with Brenda to a stereotype? Is Clyde hopelessly out of touch? Is there validity to his claim? What does Joanna say?
12. As the firstborn, Susan has a prominent role in the family, and leads a more conventional life than Joanna. Why, then, is Susan the one who separates from her parents? Susan seems better able to move forward in life. Why?
13. How would Clyde have fared in the #Metoo movement?
14. Evie saves the letters Clyde wrote her during WWII, while Clyde loses Evie's letters to him. It's not intentional, but the loss is an example of how women are left out of history. What are some other subtle and not-so-subtle instances of women being marginalized in *The Orphan's Daughter* or in your own experience?
15. Fred is a gentle and stabilizing force in Joanna's life and more evolved than Clyde in his attitude toward women. In what way does Fred hold Joanna back?
16. Why does it take so long for the doctors to figure out what disease Clyde is suffering from? Is their ineptitude believable?
17. Why doesn't Joanna ask her mother to split the \$20,000 with Brenda, so that Joanna can finally get her stuff? Giving up \$10,000 would not be life-changing for Evie, and Brenda has a valid point of view. What would you do in that circumstance?
18. Joanna commits a felony when she breaks into the house, violating Brenda's privacy. Should she be punished?
19. *The Orphan's Daughter* is fiction, but the Hebrew National Orphan Home existed, and the author's father lived there for ten years, starting in 1924 when he was seven. The Home had its own farm, synagogue, school, teachers and mentors, a newspaper and a marching band. But it also had sadistic supervisors and severe punishments. (In 1936, reforms were made by a progressive superintendent.) Do you think the HNOH provided a good upbringing for poor Jewish children? Does it seem better or worse than the foster care system we have now? Would foster children today benefit from orphanage life?
20. Clyde idealizes the orphanage and calls it a Garden of Eden; at the same time he uses the experience as an excuse for his rage. Do you think the orphanage was more positive or negative for Clyde? For the inmates in general?
21. Joanna also idealizes her childhood, describing the natural world in nostalgic terms, the cozy feeling she has with her family in the warm kitchen, the thrill of traveling across the ocean. Do you think it's possible Joanna had a happy childhood?

22. In what ways are Joanna and her father alike? If Joanna had been a boy, do you think s/he would have been treated differently by Clyde? How?
23. A family friend molests Joanna when she is a young teenager. What impact does this have on her life? Would you say she is traumatized?
24. Do you think Evie was a negligent mother?
25. Clyde tells his daughters the years they were in elementary school were the happiest time of his life. Joanna tells Clyde the year the family spent abroad was transformational for her. Each statement is a gift to the other. The way we reflect on the past and share it with family and friends is a path toward forgiveness and redemption. Do you believe these gifts are adequate?
26. Joanna is criticized for her obsession with the past. What does it mean to hang onto the past? How can reliving the past lead to personal growth? How does it hinder personal growth?
27. *The Orphan's Daughter* is based on a true story. What makes it a novel and not a memoir?
28. Before reading *The Orphan's Daughter*, were you aware of the existence of Jewish orphanages in America?
29. The Jewish Daily Forward published a weekly feature called "The Gallery of Missing Husbands." Does it surprise you that so many Jewish men deserted their families in 1920s America?
30. Clyde has a colorful and close extended family, yet no one is willing or able to take in Clyde and his brother Harry. Is this understandable? Is it forgivable? Do you believe Clyde's mother was a terrible person for putting him in an institution? Why does Clyde call her a saint?
31. Do you think Joanna should break up with Fred?
32. *The Orphan's Daughter* opens with this line: "I broke into the house I grew up in to steal back my childhood." Do you think Joanna successfully takes possession of her history by the end of the novel?