

BOOK CLUBS AND READING GROUPS

Book Club Guide

A flexible 60-90 minute conversation plan for *A Very Present Help*, with spoiler controls, historical context, and questions that leave room for the people in the room.



CRAIG A. HART

Official companion resource - craigahart.com/book-clubs

Before everyone arrives

- Ask the group whether everyone has finished the novel. Keep the first round spoiler-free if even one reader has not.
- Put the interactive companion on a shared screen if useful. The Discussion Room reveals one prompt at a time.
- Print the journey sheet for readers who want the wartime route and key terms close at hand.
- Content note: the novel includes wartime violence, imprisonment, deprivation, Nazi persecution, and threats to life.

A simple running order

- 01 Arrival - 10 minutes: What image, scene, or idea stayed with you after the final page?
- 02 The two timelines - 15 minutes: Compare the ways Billie and David face uncertainty.
- 03 The history file - 15 minutes: Explore one true detail and one invented element.
- 04 The central questions - 30 minutes: Choose three or four prompts from the next pages.
- 05 Closing - 10 minutes: What do we owe the people whose records and stories have disappeared?

Opening round

- 01 Before discussing plot, describe the emotional weather of the book in one word.
- 02 Which timeline first claimed your attention? Did that change as you read?
- 03 What expectation did the opening chapters create, and how did the novel complicate it?

Spoiler-free conversation

- 01 What can survive when the official record does not?
- 02 How do Billie and David respond differently when the world asks them to accept uncertainty?
- 03 Where does faith function as comfort, discipline, resistance, or something else?
- 04 How does the dual timeline affect the pace and meaning of the story?
- 05 Which physical object carries the most emotional weight?
- 06 What responsibilities does a novelist have when imagining the inner life of a real person?
- 07 How does the book distinguish evidence, inference, family memory, and invention?
- 08 Which landscape feels most alive: wartime Lorraine, the camps, modern Germany, or the road home?

The author note as a second ending

Read the author's note only after finishing the novel. Then discuss whether learning exactly what was true changed the emotional weight of the story.

"I have done it because the alternative was to let a young Army private from Yazoo County, Mississippi disappear entirely into that St. Louis fire."

Full-book conversation

The questions below discuss the ending and central revelations.

- 01 Was David right to continue after the break-in made the danger unmistakable?
- 02 How does the ledger change the meaning of Billie's silence across generations?
- 03 What does Klaus believe about history, ownership, and inheritance? Where does his reasoning fail?
- 04 Why is recovering the unknown soldier's identity as important as recovering the gold?
- 05 Compare Billie's homecoming with David's arrival at Terminal 4. What does WELCOME HOME mean in each scene?
- 06 Does the fictional conspiracy preserve Billie's story, risk overshadowing it, or accomplish both?
- 07 How does hunger alter the prisoners' moral world without erasing their agency?
- 08 What does the novel ask us to notice about liberation, including who pays its cost?
- 09 Which choice most clearly defines Billie? Which choice most clearly defines David?
- 10 If the National Personnel Records Center fire had not occurred, would this story feel fundamentally different?

What was true

- 01 Billie was captured on September 20, 1944, during an attempt to take a village on a hill.
- 02 He endured three days and four nights in an overcrowded railcar with almost no food or water.
- 03 Psalm 46 was given to him on that train and remained his favorite psalm.
- 04 He preached to prisoners at Limburg and sang during air raids.
- 05 He survived hunger, farm labor, and the incident involving a freshly dead deer.
- 06 His lost Bible was found and mailed home without word of whether he was alive.
- 07 He left after the Germans withdrew, traveled west, and returned through New York Harbor beneath a WELCOME HOME sign.

What was invented

- The courier, secret map, parchment, hidden name, buried Mercedes, gold, and ledger.
- Klaus Brandt, the Brandt family, and the Brandt Foundation.
- David Hart, who is described by Craig as both a composite and a wish.
- Some geographic compression and one knowingly retained postwar phrase.

Closing the room

- 01 What is one historical detail you want to research further?
- 02 Whose story in your own family exists only in fragments?
- 03 What might it mean to welcome someone home decades after their death?

Continue with Craig

Craig is available for selected book-club conversations, classroom visits, interviews, and programs about transforming family history into fiction. Visit craigahart.com/contact.