READING GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

A PLACE CALLED ARDEN

A MEMOIR OF ART AND BELONGING

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A NOTE FOR READING GROUPS

A Place Called Arden follows a year's worth of seasons—June through June—in one of America's oldest and most unusual intentional communities. But the questions it raises are universal: What does it take to truly belong somewhere? How do shared spaces, shared meals, and shared work change us? And what might we build if we stopped waiting for community to find us?

Whether your group has been meeting for years or just found one another, these questions are yours to explore together.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

On Belonging and the Decision to Root

1. Jill describes Arden as the first place she truly felt she belonged—after ten generations of family roots in Lancaster County. What does her story suggest about the difference between being from somewhere and truly belonging somewhere? Have you experienced that distinction in your own life?

2. The book's structure mirrors its argument: Belonging is an accumulation, not a moment. How did the seasonal, month-by-month arc shape your experience of reading? Did you feel yourself settling into Arden alongside Jill?

3. Jill moves to Arden as a "lone-wolf artist" seeking what the early Ardenites also wanted. What was she running toward? What, if anything, was she running from?

On Community—Its Beauty and Its Difficulty

4. Arden was founded on Georgist land-tax principles and Arts and Crafts ideals, yet most residents today couldn't give you a lecture on either. Jill's hometown of Lititz was founded as a religious settlement and is now billed as the "Coolest Small Town in America." What do these examples suggest about how communities sustain themselves—and what gets kept, lost, or transformed when founding intentions fade?

5. The book doesn't idealize Arden. Where do you see the tensions, the imperfections, the moments where community is hard? Did those moments make the book feel more or less hopeful to you?

6. Jill describes community as something made, not found—built through repeated presence, shared work, and showing up over time. Do you agree? Can you point to a moment in the book where you watched that process happen in real time?

On Place, Design, and the Built Environment

7. The founders built the theater before they built the houses. What does that choice reveal about their values? Are there places in your own community where the design of space shapes how people relate to one another?

8. Arden's footpaths, open greens, and shared gathering spaces are described as deliberate tools for connection. How does your own physical environment encourage—or discourage—community life?

On Art, Ritual, and Participation

9. Art in Arden isn't decorative—it's structural. The Shakespeare Gild, the Craft Shop, and the summer co-op all function as connective tissue. Is there something in your own life that plays that role? What happens to communities that lack it?

10. The book is full of rituals—solstice celebrations, communal meals, the Arden Fair, journaling workshops. What is the function of ritual in building belonging? Are there rituals in your own community that you've taken for granted?

11. By the end of the book, Jill feels free to choose which community doors she steps through—and which she lets pass. How does that freedom differ from indifference? What's the relationship between commitment and choice in a healthy community?

On Belonging

12. Who is Jill at the beginning of the book, and who is she at the end? What does she have to surrender or change in order to truly belong?

13. The book suggests that people and communities transform one another. Where do you see Jill changing Arden, not just Arden changing Jill?

14. At the close of the book, Jill writes that not everyone lives in a village like Arden—but many of us belong to circles asking how to live more intentionally together. What is your version of Arden? What would you have to do, or give up, or show up for, to build it?

On the Larger Questions

15. The book sits in conversation with a growing body of writing about loneliness, social fragmentation, and the hunger for community. What does A Place Called Arden offer that research or policy arguments can't?

16. If you could transplant one thing from Arden into your own neighborhood, what would it be?

A CLOSING INVITATION

Before your group closes, consider sharing one word—just one—that describes what you most want more of in your own community life. You don't have to have a plan. Just the word.

INVITE JILL TO YOUR GROUP

Jill Althouse-Wood joins book groups and community gatherings in person around the Mid-Atlantic and by video anywhere.

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