

REEL LIFE

A NOVEL

By Jackie Townsend
Reading Group Guide

ABOUT THE BOOK

“Are sisters always there for each other?” With iconic moments of contemporary cinema driving the narrative thread, two sisters call upon the past in the desperate search for an answer, for their radically different lives and priorities have clashed in a climax of rage and unfulfilled expectations—motherhood, ambition, love. Throughout, the novel filters their inner journeys through the prism of films that have marked each stage of their lives, from the false hope of *The Wizard of Oz* to the dark tones of *Blue Velvet* to the child-like magic of *Shrek*.

Reel Life will shock, surprise and move anyone who understands that sometimes, escaping reality offers the clearest path to emotional truth.

Book Club Guide

1. What is the meaning behind the title: *Reel Life*? What plays between the words Reel and Real?
2. The sisters are constantly told they look like twins, when, in fact, they grow into vastly different women. How are they different? Were they born this way? How is it that two women who grew up in such close proximity have such vastly different views of their parents and childhood?
3. At what point did Betty and Jamie become friends vs. sisters for the first time. Or were they ever, for can sisters ever really be friends? Do you think they would be friends if they weren't sisters?

4. What role do movies play in the novel? How do they enhance scenes and/or propel the action forward? For example, in the chapter “The Exorcist,” what does the film represent to the story that unfolds?
5. The mother tells the girls when they are little: “Sisters are always there for each other.” Is this true? How have Betty and Jamie always been there for each other? Or is that statement a fallacy.
6. Each sister has her own distinct relationship with her mother, roles if you will. Describe each. Are they resolved in the end?
7. Each sister is undergoing a crisis in her respective marriage. Why can't they communicate these problems to one another? Do you share intimate feelings or humbling insecurities with your sister? Your friend? Why is it that we cannot discuss our personal failures to the ones closest to us?
8. Why do the sisters stop talking to each other after they part ways in the chapter, *La Strada*? What is the real underlying problem?
9. The sisters look up to their older brother, Steven, though he is mostly an absent presence. What does he bring to the novel? How does his existence help form the relationship between the sisters?
10. Betty thinks pregnancy should be natural, that “It will happen when it happens.” Is she ultimately right, given what happens to Jamie?
11. What would you have done if your husband of eight years told you that he'd fathered a child before he knew you? Does Roberto deserve to be forgiven? Does Jamie?
12. Why is Betty so unfulfilled? She has a doting husband, loving children, why is she unhappy? Do you think she should stay with Dave? Or do you think she should, as her mother might, find what she's passionate about, do what's in her heart?
13. What is Roberto searching for in Thailand? Does he find it? Have you ever felt like escaping your life? Do you think he and Jamie should get back together?
14. Marie is portrayed as both a narcissistic and loving mother. She leaves her daughters when they are young but remains a strong indelible presence in their lives. She is in no way a perfect mother. Does her relationship with them grow and change? Does she find redemption?
15. What does her death mean for the sisters' ongoing relationship?