

A Symphony of Cicadas Discussion Guide

Chapters 1-6

1. *“I know you’re awake,” the muffled voice called from the hallway. “I’m trying to sleep, and between your racket and Joey talking in his headset, it’s kind of hard.” (pg. 6)*
Rachel and John are in the beginning of a passionate romance, and raising their blended family of teenage sons. How might this combination make things difficult? How might it make things easier? Have you ever had one of your kids interrupt an intimate moment?
2. *Tony had stepped out on me when I was still pregnant, visiting just a few times after Joey was born before disappearing altogether. It seems he decided that fatherhood just wasn’t for him, something he stated in a letter he sent me weeks after his last visit, explaining that he couldn’t handle the responsibility of parenting. (pg. 9)*
Rachel spent more than a decade being a single parent to Joey. How do you think this affected how she parented Joey? How might her experience with Tony have changed her views on men in general?
3. *“When you’re inside the world, you can only see what’s right in front of you. But on the edge of the world, you can see everything that’s going on in it,” he explained. (pg. 12)*
Joey is describing his videogame, but this sentiment also becomes the theme of the story. Has there ever been a time when you were too close to something to see the whole picture, only to realize this when you were able to take a step back?
4. *I felt my head grow even heavier against the car seat, the pain in my body evaporating with the sounds. When the last bird had sung, the whole world became quiet. And I was cast into a sea of nothing. (pg. 29)*
What were your thoughts as Chapter Two came to a close?
5. *To keep from unraveling, I focused on his halcyon expression, willing him to open his eyes and see me, too. Instead, a small spark of light, the same light that had been sent to me earlier, emerged from his forehead and hovered just above him. (pg. 38)*
What do you think the light is? Where do you think Joey is?
6. *“Oh, my dear,” Rose crooned. “There, there. It’s all going to be okay.” She pet my hair as I shook, her compassion opening the floodgates. Free to let my guard down, I stopped fighting against my fear and sadness, and allowed myself a good, ugly cry on her shoulder. (p. 46)*

Rachel is at her most vulnerable when Aunt Rose shows up. She represents the link to her family when she thinks she's separate from everyone else, and becomes Rachel's anchor to hold onto just when she thinks she's lost. In your life, who is the one person that makes you feel comforted, even just by thinking of them?

7. *And that's when it hit me. Aunt Rose had said the way to be close to someone or a certain time, we were to feel it in every fiber of our being. While Rose had wanted to move on and be free, she was unable to because she loved me too much. I looked at her in alarm, my eyes burning as they searched over her panicked face.*

"I'm so sorry, Rachel. I didn't mean for this to happen," she pleaded. "I didn't know!" "You killed me?" I whispered. "You killed me, and you killed my son?" (pg. 54-55)

Did this part of the story surprise you? Did it make you think differently about Aunt Rose than before?

8. *"But Rachel always described Sam as a kid she had difficulty getting to know," Sara noted, curiosity in her eyes.*

It was as if she were mirroring my thoughts. When I had first moved in, Sam spent most of his days shut off in his room. Despite the fact that John and I had been dating for three years before I died, I didn't know the kid very well. It took some time and lots of patience before he began opening his door and joining in on the conversation with us. (Pg. 70-71)

Not only are Rachel and John getting married, they also are blending their family. How is a stepparent's relationship with their stepchild different from the one they share with their own child? How do you think Sam feels about Rachel living with him and his dad?

Chapters 7-12

9. *"Don't listen to him," I shouted at them. "There is no Heaven or Hell, there is no God welcoming us home or devil trying to snare our souls! When you die, you just exist forever in this nothing of a hellhole. There is no reason, no purpose, nothing!" (pg. 92)*

Have you ever questioned the religion you are, or the religion you were raised on?

10. *"A carnival?" I squealed. "That's your distraction?" "Can you think of anything better?" she asked. (pg. 99)*

Jane's happiest place in the afterlife is at a carnival. Where would your happiest place be?

11. *I was beginning to understand even more what Aunt Rose had described to me, the addiction that takes place when surrounded with those we loved in life, and how much heavier it became with time. I knew that on this Ferris wheel I was being presented with a choice – to walk away or to run back into the addiction. I knew that I was making the*

wrong choice. But I didn't care. I realized that no heaven was truly perfect unless I could see John's face every moment of the day. (pg. 105)

Do you think Rachel is making the right choice? Would you be tempted to stay near your loved ones after life if you had the choice?

12. *This sudden act of waking up from wherever he had disappeared to confused the hell out of Sam. He didn't know whether to be angry or grateful to have this glimpse of his old dad. He wanted to confront him on it, ask him who the hell his father thought he was, say everything he wanted to say in the past six months about his dad having been a vacant vessel. But instead, he grabbed a towel off the counter and began drying the wet dishes John had placed into the rack. (pg. 115)*

Discuss how you think John and Sam's relationship has changed since Rachel died. What should they do differently? How has grief changed the way you handled parts of your life in the past?

13. *And in one swift movement, he lifted his arm and flung the rest of the rocks out into the water with all of his force, hearing the satisfying sounds they made as they disturbed the smooth surface. Except, not one of those rocks took away the pain he was carrying. (pg. 135)*

In Chapter 10, we get to know Sam a lot better, particularly all the things he keeps hidden from those close to him. What are your thoughts on Sam? Have you ever felt the same way as he does?

14. *It had been so long since she had been held with such care, making the distance that had been growing between her and Kevin that much wider. She pushed away the feelings of comfort the hug gave her, giving a vague smile to John as she picked up her purse. (pg. 140)*

This is the first hint that something is going wrong at Sara and Kevin's house. What are your thoughts about this scene?

15. *"What are you saying, Sam?" John asked, his body rigid as he waited for what they both knew was coming.*

"I'm moving in with Mom." (pg. 148)

How is John feeling about Sam moving out? How would you feel if your child wanted to live with their other parent?

16. *Despite my disbelief in Heaven in those early days of my death, I had grown to believe that there really was something out there. I could sense a stirring within me at the faint trembling notes that existed in the corners of space, and I felt its pull whenever I let go of my hold on the living long enough to exist in the world of the dead. And I believed Joey*

was there. (pg. 154)

What else do you think may have contributed to Rachel's change of mind about whether Heaven existed or not?

Chapters 13-17

17. *"If you don't stop wishing him with you, he's going to die, Rachel." Her eyes flashed with determination as she tried to get me to see what I was refusing to see.*

I had caused this. (pg. 164)

Rachel was almost guilty of killing John simply by wishing they could be together again. It was the exact way she died when Aunt Rose wished she could be near Rachel again. Do you think it helped Rachel to understand her Aunt Rose's mistake a little better?

18. *Every one of the kids kept a safe distance from the boy, as if his paralyzed body and mind of marbles were catching; only glancing over their shoulders when a baritone laugh would escape from his lungs. (pg. 170)*

When Rachel and Aunt Rose visit the hospital, Rachel can't help but notice the children who are staying there are avoiding one severely handicapped child – even though they are all sick, as well. What do you think makes others afraid of those who are different from them?

19. *Jacob kissed her on the cheek, smiling at his mother with love, and then ran back to his aunt. Together they evaporated from the room as his mother collapsed in a shaking and silent cry with her head on his lifeless chest. (pg. 178)*

Jacob is able to leave his mother, even though it's apparent he loves her very much. Why do you think it's easier for him than it is for Rachel or Aunt Rose?

20. *Without thinking, John inhaled, catching once again the familiar scent of my hair in my sister's blonde locks. It stirred something inside him, just as it had before. Except this time, instead of seeing my face in front of him, he saw Sara's. The feeling caught him off guard, but he managed to tuck it away. Sara didn't see it, but the newness of this emotion inside him felt like a slap in my face. (pg. 190)*

All this time, John has been mourning the loss of Rachel. This is the first time Rachel has ever witnessed him thinking of another woman – a woman who happens to be her sister. How do you think it must be for Rachel to see the man she loves turn his attention towards her sister?

21. *When we reached the house, I prayed that my sister had already left for one of her many friends' houses. But there she was, swaying back and forth on the swing that hung from the tree outside our house. I groaned and held Eric's hand tighter.*

"Who's that?" he asked.

"That's Sara," I said. "She's my older sister." I tried to ignore the way he looked at her, seeing something in her that I thought he had seen in me. (pg. 204)

Why do you think Rachel is so competitive with her older sister? Have you ever felt this way with one of your siblings or close friends?

22. *"Who is that?" I asked Frank.*

"That's her second husband, Oscar," he told me, smiling with kindness in the direction of the man who now held fast to his wife.

"You're not jealous," I stated with surprise. "Doesn't it hurt to see someone else looking at your wife that way?" (pg. 213)

Why isn't Frank jealous of the man who is now married to his wife? How do you think it affects Rachel to meet someone who views love the way Frank does?

23. *"What would happen if I walked out upon the fog, Daddy?" I had asked my father that day driving above the covered valley.*

"You'd pass right through and fall to the ground," my father had told me, stripping away all the magic my five year old self still held when it came to science and life.

The fog touched the edge of Mauna Kea, inviting me to test my father's theory and prove him wrong. (pg. 216)

Why do you think it's so important for Rachel to prove her father wrong?

Chapters 18-20

24. *Still, Sara called every now and then just to check in on him. He had let her calls go straight to voicemail each time. Then he listened to them as soon as his phone signaled a message, hearing my voice within hers as she let him know she was thinking of him and hoped everything was going okay. (pg. 220)*

Why was John ignoring Sara? If he didn't want to talk with her, why was he so eager to hear her message?

25. *I crouched in the corner, frozen by the scene unfolding in front of me. I was afraid to stay, but more afraid to leave. I could feel everything – the way it felt to be touched after countless nights alone, the elation of being in each other's arms, the confusion that went alongside it, and the sadness that each of them stuffed down as they pretended in the moment that this was something it wasn't. (pg. 226)*

How do you think Rachel is feeling as she watches things heat up between her sister and her fiancé? Scared? Jealous? Understanding? How would you feel in this situation?

26. *"You smell like her," he whispered, his movements slowing as he voiced his thought. She tightened her hold on him.*

"Please, just go with it," she said. She didn't elaborate, afraid that too many words would take away from the moment. She knew he missed me, even as his body molded against hers. He needed this to be able to move past me, but also to feel close to me. She needed this for a different reason - just to feel wanted once again. (pg. 228-229)

Why do you think Sara and John are together? Could they be falling for each other? Or are they merely using each other for what they aren't getting from the one they really love?

27. *"I don't love you anymore!" Kevin blurted out. Sara gasped, the words slicing right through her. They both stared at each other, neither one able to believe the words had been spoken. Her hands trembled as she lifted them to her mouth, her eyes filling with tears. The regret was evident in Kevin's eyes, but it was too late. "I'm sorry, Sara. I didn't mean that. I—," but she waved him off with a flip of her hand as the tears broke over the barrier of her eyes, spilling down her cheeks.*

"Don't. Don't even try to take it away. You said it. You finally said what I knew was true." (pg. 233)

Why do you think Sara and Kevin's marriage is falling apart? What could they have been doing differently to make things work?

28. *John was confused by her reaction. The Sara he knew wouldn't be this casual about a night of passion. Or would she? He'd never been intimate with her before, so how would he know how she'd react? John realized he might not know her as well as he thought. (pg. 239)*

How does John feel about Sara? How does Sara feel about John? Why do you think Sara is reacting this way to John?

29. *"...I don't know if we're getting a divorce. Daddy and I haven't talked to each other about it."*

"Then why isn't he here?" Megan demanded.

"Because Daddy and Mommy are taking a small break from being married to each other. It's not a forever break right now, just a vacation break," she said, realizing how lame that terminology sounded. Vacations were when you went somewhere fun. This was anything but fun. (pg. 247-248)

Sara is trying to explain divorce to her kids, and what's going on between her and their

father...and it's not going as well as she wanted it to. Could she have done it any differently?

Chapter 20-24

30. *"Seems that everyone is moving into a new season," Aunt Rose said beside me, appearing next to me out of nowhere. I was no longer surprised when she appeared out of thin air, and I welcomed her regular visits. I knew she had been listening for a while before appearing, knowing she witnessed a lot of the same lives I watched over. I nodded at her sentiment, not even hiding the wistfulness attached to the reality. (pg. 255)*

How have the characters changed from the beginning of the story to where they are now?

31. *She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Of all the scenarios that had played through her head, this was one she never thought of. She'd been so sure he was going to start making arrangements for the divorce, to discuss lawyers and paperwork, to rip her heart out of her chest and crush it with the bottom of his shoe. And here he was, wanting her back, wanting to be a family. A brief glimpse of the other night with John burst into her mind.*

"Oh god," she said, pulling her hand away from Kevin's grasp. (pg. 260)

Do you think Sara and John's romantic evening might complicate things for her and Kevin?

32. *"But don't you see? That's exactly why that night was a mistake. You don't love me, you love the idea of me – the one that is mixed up with thoughts of my sister." (pg. 268)*

Do you agree with what Sara is saying to John? Why?

33. *"I danced on the cables of the Golden Gate Bridge, running up the rusty orange rails toward the top of the towers and taking a long look at the expanse of the bay. I climbed into the trees on Telegraph Hill, letting the parrots that lived within the branches project their colorful thoughts back and forth from their head to mine and back again. I ran the bases at AT&T Park..." (pg. 274)*

What if you knew your time on earth was coming to an end? Where would you go? Who would you visit? What would you want to experience before it was all over?

34. *It was as if time turned sideways and broke open, spilling all the contents of the future out in front of me. Time skipped, and she was there in front of him, kissing him while dressed in white as they stood in front of all their friends and family.... (pg. 281)*

In the beginning of the story, Rachel felt as if she could never let go of John. Here, she is

at peace with him finding his forever mate...someone who isn't her. What happened throughout her journey to help her come full circle with her feelings?

35. *"Life is often unfair. Sometimes things have to hurt, sometimes they're even unbearable, and sometimes the pain is necessary.*

I learned this lesson the hard way. But I learned much more than just that. (pg. 283)

This passage is repeated from the prologue at the beginning of the book, but it goes on to reflect how Rachel is a new person. How would you describe her at the beginning of the story? How about now?

36. *"Let's go," she whispered, her hushed voice filled with giddiness, her smile that of a child, and we walked through. And the songs of the angels cascaded over us, reminiscent of the cicadas' song in a forest a long, long time ago. (pg. 287)*

What do you think happens after this final scene?

37. After reading the book, what message do you think the author is trying to tell through this story?

Bonus: Email the answer to #37, and any other thoughts you have on the book to crissi@crissilangwell.com.

Thank you for reading!