



## ***Still Life with Monkey* Reading Group Guide** by Katharine Weber

### **About the Book**

Duncan Wheeler is a successful architect who savors the quotidian pleasures in life until a car accident leaves him paralyzed and haunted by the death of his young assistant. Duncan isn't sure what there is left to live for when every day has become "a broken series of unsuccessful gestures." When his will to live falters, his wife, Laura, grows desperate to repair the damage. She brings home a highly trained helper monkey—a tufted capuchin name Ottoline—to assist Duncan with basic tasks. In time Duncan and Laura fall for this sweet, comical, Nutella-gobbling little creature, and Duncan's life appears to become more tolerable—fuller and funnier—but Duncan still finds himself questioning if the life he's left with is enough.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. Why does Duncan keep the details he recalls of the events leading up to the car accident a secret? Why does he feel so responsible for Todd's death? Did Todd have awareness of Duncan's feelings?
2. How do each of the characters deal with their secrets? How do you think keeping these secrets influences who they are and their decisions, if at all?
3. Do you think Duncan and Laura had a happy marriage before the accident? How would you define a "good marriage"?
4. Do you think it is morally acceptable to train capuchin monkeys as helper monkeys? Is it any different from seeing-eye dogs?
5. Why do you think Duncan allows Ottoline to come into his life?
6. Do you think Duncan may have made a different choice if Laura was pregnant and able to carry the baby to term?

7. What might have happened if Gordon had agreed to Laura's requests to help her give Duncan something to live for?
8. Duncan's story asks us to consider both the will to live and the right to die. Do you think this is an important topic to discuss in today's society? Why?
9. Duncan and Gordon were both profoundly affected by the house they grew up in. How do you think this affects their stories? Is this equally true for most people?
10. Would Duncan and Gordon's sibling relationship be different if they were not twins?
11. Why did Laura conceal the breakage of the pre-Columbian figurine? Did she do the right thing when she agreed to create a false report about the pair of bowls for the Cavendishes as part of a deal to get Duncan's Four-Square house built? Is Laura a good person?
12. What do you think actually happened that day in Laura's childhood at the Ohio State Fair?
13. What do you think will happen to Gordon in the next few years? What do you think Laura's life will be like from now on? Will Gordon and Laura be at peace with Duncan's choice and come to respect it?
14. Has Duncan's story altered any of your previous perceptions of the daily life of the differently-abled? How and why?

### **About the Author**

Katharine Weber lives in Connecticut and teaches Creative Writing at Kenyon College in Ohio. She is the author of seven books, three of which were named notable books by *The New York Times*. Her short fiction has also been published in *The New Yorker* and *Story*, and her book reviews, essays, and journalism have appeared in publications including the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Boston Globe*, and the *Washington Post*, among many others.