



A MOUTHFUL OF AIR
a novel by
Amy Koppelman

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Reader Guide: Questions and Topics for Discussion
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1. The poem “The Girl” by Marie Howe, from the collection *What the Living Do: Poems*, serves as an epigraph for *A Mouthful of Air*. What might have drawn the author to this particular poem for this story about Julie?
2. We see Julie’s childhood copy of *The Velveteen Rabbit* being passed down to her by her mother: what was interesting about the particular section that Julie sought out? Why do you think she might have been drawn to this passage, focused on “becoming Real”?
3. More than once, we see Julie noticing the apartment window across the courtyard from hers: what does she observe there? Why do you think this was so noteworthy to Julie?
4. A seemingly simple trip to the grocery stores goes horribly wrong for Julie—what happens both internally and externally for her? What was the occasion that she was planning for? Why do you think the pressure of this task was so impossible for her?
5. How does Julie feel about Georgie’s new role in their home? Does Julie feel like she has a choice in this matter?
6. Julie and her family are clearly wealthy, living in posh neighborhoods, having live-in help, access to doctors and most anything they could want: why do you think the author chose this particular character to portray a mother suffering from post-partum depression?
7. What are some of Julie’s descriptions of living with depression? Did Julie’s story further your understanding of the experience? Was it similar to something you have experienced or witnessed? Did you learn anything you did not know before about post-partum depression in particular?
8. We see Julie interacting with and analyzing her exchanges with people that she is paying or that work for her: taxi drivers, stores clerks, elevator operators, nannies. In what ways does this novel address issues of class?

9. Julie frequently observes other women to get ideas of what is appropriate for her to also do: what are some of these instances? Why do you think she depends so heavily on the behavior of others in order to determine what her own behavior should be?
10. Julie goes to regular psychotherapy appointments with Dr. Edelman: what is their relationship like? Does Julie feel as though this is helping with her depression?
11. What are the recurring phrases that Julie repeats to herself? Why do you think these mantras are at war in Julie's mind?
12. After Julie's suicide attempt, she is back home and living with her son and husband, Ethan: what is their relationship like? Does he know why his wife tried to end her life? Were you surprised by any of her husband's reactions? Do you think there are things he could have done differently?
13. Julie visits her mother, Harriet, a short while after Julie's suicide attempt: what is their interaction like? What are the various things that her mother is focused on or concerned about? How do you think this affects Julie?
14. "If you look happy, then you are happy" is a phrase that Julie's mother has repeated to her throughout her life: Does Julie believe it? Are there any instances where she is truly happy?
15. Julie frequently reflects on memories of her father from her childhood: what different aspects of their relationship are revealed over the course of the novel? What parts surprised you? How do you think Julie's relationship with her father may have affected those with her own children? Why does Julie choose not to tell her husband, Ethan, that she saw her father at the basketball game?
16. Intergenerational trauma—trauma that gets passed down from one generation to subsequent generations—can create symptoms of depression and self-destructive behaviors. Considering the story of Julie and her parents, and Julie with her own children, what role do you think intergenerational trauma might have played?
17. Despite having a doting and devoted husband, Julie envisions him having an affair and moving on to a life without her—why do you think this is?
18. Color plays an important role in this book: why do you think the author chose to do this? What are some of the contrasts in color and décor between their first home and their second home? Why do you think Julie might have made these changes to her surroundings?
19. When Julie discovers that she is pregnant with a second child, what are her thoughts and reactions? How does her husband react when he learns the news? How do they decide what to do next? How does Julie feel after learning that she will have a little girl?

20. Julie and her husband and doctors create a plan for when she will and will not take her medication, carefully considering her well-being as well as her unborn baby's well-being: What were their concerns? What are Julie's reasons for not following that plan? What influenced Julie to make this choice? Do you know anyone in your own life who has struggled with the decision to remain on medication that might come with undesired side-effects or sacrifices?
21. What do we learn was the immediate cause of Julie's attempt to end her own life? As we learn more about her family and childhood, what else do you think might have contributed to her making this type of decision? Do you think she loves her son? Why might she think they would be better off without her?
22. Does Julie feel as though she has power, control, or choice? What are some examples throughout the novel where she does? What are some examples where she does not, or feels as though she does not? Having inside knowledge to some details of her childhood, what do you think shaped these ways of thinking?
23. Is the ending of this novel what you expected? What, if anything, do you think could have been done to prevent this situation?
24. If you have seen the film adaptation of *A Mouthful of Air*, talk about their similarities and differences. Were you surprised by any of them? What did you like more? What did you miss?
25. If you have read Amy Koppelman's other novels, *I Smile Back* and *Hesitation Wounds*, would you say they have major themes in common? Talk about the similarities and differences.