

# BOOK CLUB KIT



## GET READY TO HOST YOUR BOOK CLUB!

We're so glad you've decided to host a book club to discuss *Hell If We Don't Change Our Ways*. Inside this kit you'll find a Q&A with Brittany, some group discussion and journaling activities, a mindfulness activity, and more.

Stories are best when shared, and we hope your time together helps to forge deeper connections between the members of your book club!

If you're new to hosting a book event, don't worry! We've got you covered. Here's what you'll need to do to get ready for your gathering:



- Determine if you'll meet virtually or in person.
- Save the date!
- Reach out to your local bookstore. You can direct your guests to purchase the book through the store ahead of time or coordinate with the store and have them sell the books at your event.
- Invite friends! Make sure your guests know they're welcome to attend even if they haven't read or finished the book!
- It's always fun to have some food and drinks, but don't stress about this!
- Relax and enjoy! Book clubs are meaningful because of the connections and the community. Allow everyone a chance to share or ask questions, and be mindful of those who haven't had a chance to read the book by discussing the themes rather than the specifics. Some of the content in this memoir is heavy, so be sensitive to those who need extra time or space to process and discuss.

## READING GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. When *Hell If We Don't Change Our Ways* opens, Brittany recounts the time her grandfather killed a litter of baby possums she found and wanted to save. How did this set up how you experienced the book?

2. Brittany shares the story of how she was born and that she was conceived through rape. How do you think this impacted Brittany's relationship with her mother?

3. Brittany shares that she and her mother don't always remember the same things, or remember them the same way.

Have you ever had this experience with someone? What was that experience like for you?

4. Early in the book, Brittany writes, "I don't know if I've ever been ready for anything."

Did you find this to be true of Brittany as you continued reading the book? Why or why not? Have you ever felt this way yourself?

5. How do you think Brittany's mother's relationship with her own parents influenced her relationship with Brittany? How do you think it influenced Brittany's relationship with her grandparents?

6. Before living with her grandparents, Brittany's mother didn't teach her much about Jesus. Once they moved in with her grandparents, religion played a major (and often difficult) role in Brittany's life.

How did Brittany's religious upbringing impact her? How did it impact her mother before her?

## READING GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

7. What did you think about Brittany's experience living with her grandparents after her mother left with Mark? How did this time impact Brittany later in life?

8. Brittany talks about how the Bible was supposed to be her only influence when she lived with her grandparents, but television played a big role when she was with her mother (and Mark). How do you think these two influences contradicted each other and worked together to influence who Brittany was and who she became?

9. Brittany talks about memory and how our brains try to protect us, make unexpected associations, and even fill in gaps.

Did this section of the book make you think about your own memories? Why or why not? How did this book make you think about Brittany and her memories?

10. In Chapter 4, Brittany shares many of the abusive moments in her life that she experienced with both her mother and with Mark.

What did this chapter change for you? How do you think the trauma Brittany experienced as a child impacted how she interacted with other children and adults in her life?

11. Brittany has multiple experiences with adults who don't believe her or who put her in other unsafe situations.

How would things have been different for Brittany if an adult had believed her about Mark? What did Brittany's experience teach you about how we care for children in unsafe situations?



## READING GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

12. At the beginning of Chapter 5, Brittany talks about how feeling unlovable contributed to being a well-behaved child and not knowing how to be charming as an adult.

Have you ever had an experience (or experiences) that has changed how you behave? How did you overcome this feeling?

13. Brittany's brother Ben obviously played an important role in her childhood and continues to play an important role in her life.

How do you think the differences in their childhoods impacted them? How did the trauma they experienced together manifest differently as they grew up? How did they help each other heal?

14. Living in The Barn was both a difficult and beautiful experience. Why do you think living there influenced Brittany and Ben in different ways? Was there anything good about The Barn? What impact did living in The Barn have on Brittany as an adult?

15. After The Barn was deemed unsafe for children, Brittany bounced around to a few places, and even ended up back with Mark.

Why do you think the adults in Brittany's life made this decision? How do you think returning to live with Mark impacted her?

16. Brittany spends time in several different homes as she grows up, often with other members of her family.

How did living in these different homes impact Brittany? What do you think living with someone like her Uncle Jon or her Aunt Ginger taught Brittany? Do you think those moments were more harmful for her or more helpful?

## READING GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

17. Clay was Brittany's first love, and initially their relationship seemed typical for their age. How did that change over time? Why do you think it changed?

18. When Brittany's mother left, Brittany went to live with the Smiths. For a long time, it was the most stable home she had ever had.

What was positive about living with the Smiths? How did Brittany's relationship with Clay impact the safest home she'd ever had?

19. What do you think going to college taught Brittany about herself? What did it teach her about her family?

20. How did Brittany begin to heal? Do you think healing is a one-step process, or a multi-step process?

21. How did Jeff help Brittany heal? Why is her relationship with Jeff important?

22. *Hell If We Don't Change Our Ways* ends nearly where it began—in the car. What was it about those long drives that were so important to Brittany? What does the final section of the book, “We’re Here,” say about how people move on from trauma?

23. *Hell If We Don't Change Our Ways* deals directly with the complicated issue of generational trauma. What are the biggest ways that generational trauma impacted Brittany, and how are she and Ben ending the cycle?

24. If you're comfortable sharing, talk about your experience with generational trauma, if you have any. Did Brittany's story teach you anything about your own life?

## Q&A WITH BRITTANY

### **1. When did you choose to begin writing such a personal story? Did you start from the beginning, or did you move throughout time?**

I'm not sure when I chose to start writing this. I've been telling and writing stories since before I was tall enough to ride a rollercoaster. If I had to pinpoint a moment when I probably actually started, it would be in Jill Christman's nonfiction class at Ball State. That's where I learned to write essays and started attempting to put down some of the stories that lived the loudest inside of me. Then, I went to graduate school so I could hone my skills and have the time to figure out how I wanted to tell the story. I started with the parts that felt most pressing to get out, and then I worked around those parts. The introduction was the last thing I wrote.

### **2. Can you tell me about your writing process? How long did it take to write this book?**

My writing process generally includes thinking a lot, listening to music, and going into a trance, and then lying on the floor. I started working on the essays that would become chapters when I first got to Iowa's Nonfiction Writing Program back in 2017. I didn't keep a lot of that material, but it helped me figure out how I wanted to write it. During my thesis year, I finally started putting the whole thing together and thinking of it as one continuous book instead of self-contained essays. Then, I edited it with my agents, and then edited it again with my editor, and then edited it again with my new editor. I edited it so much that I spontaneously developed rabies and grew goat horns and learned how to blow up trees with my mind. Then, there was the legal read and the typeset read, etc., and I surpassed rage and exhaustion and achieved ego death.

## Q&A WITH BRITTANY

**3. A memoir like *Hell If We Don't Change Our Ways* is extremely intimate and reveals a lot about your family. Were you worried about what family members might think about your book?**

I was extremely concerned with what my loved ones who are in the book might think about how they were portrayed and how it might affect their relationships with me, each other, and themselves. I think every nonfiction writer has to decide their own moral and ethical approach to balancing telling their story and respecting the experience of people they share a story with. For me, it was important to give my loved ones a chance to read and talk through their reactions. I got a wide range of responses. Some preferred not to read and gave me blanket approval; some read and asked me to make changes; some sent me long, furious messages; and some wanted only to reminisce. I'm not sure if there's ever a perfect answer for how to write about people who have loved and hurt you. I just know that I always wrote with the intention that my readers would see the complexity and humanity in everyone I portrayed.

**4. What was the easiest part about writing this book? What was most difficult?**

The easiest part was probably just getting the story out of my head and onto the page. That came most naturally to me, even when it hurt. The hardest part was, I think, coming back to the book again and again as I grew into a different person from the narrator I'd started as. There were feelings and conclusions I had when I started the book that feel very far away now. That's a good thing, and I owe it in part to the process of writing the book. But it was also detrimental to my mental and physical health after a while to keep myself in that mindset when I'd gotten everything I needed out of writing it. Sometimes the only thing that kept me going was my desire to love and honor the person I used to be.



## Q&A WITH BRITTANY

### **5. What would you tell your younger self about the healing journey you've gone through?**

In therapy sometimes, iterations of this question come up. If I'm answering like I would in therapy, I think about what my present self would get catharsis from saying. In that case, I might tell my younger self that we're going to be okay, that I love her, and that she's not grotesque or damned. If, instead, I'm imagining, like Ben, that I could actually step through some kind of wormhole and talk to my younger self, I would consider what she needed to hear. Our needs are different. From what I remember of living in her mind, I don't think there's much I could actually tell her that would be of significant comfort. I like to imagine that I would let her talk instead, answer any questions she had, and show her through my attentiveness and tenderness how well we're doing, that we turned out to be someone who knows how to love us.

### **6. Have you always written personal nonfiction? Did you ever consider using your story as the basis for a novel instead?**

The first thing I wrote creatively was poetry. I mainly wrote poetry until college, and I still do, but most of my time is spent on prose these days. I tried fiction for a while, but it isn't my wheelhouse. There is actually an idea I have for a novel based on certain parts of my life though, but I think it might actually be a TV show idea. Who knows, man.

## Q&A WITH BRITTANY

### **7. What advice would you give to someone who wants to write their own memoir?**

First of all, all of those meaningful lyrics that feel intrinsic to your memories? Make peace with the fact that you're either going to have to take most of them out or pay a gazillion dollars for the rights to keep them in there. Second—this should actually be first, but I'm bitter about those lyrics—take care of yourself while you write. That's so easy to say and hard to actually know how to do. Just listen to your body and your brain. When you need to step away from writing because it's making you feel weird and bad, do it, even if that means squandering *The Inspiration*. There were days when I pushed myself to keep going because I knew I could, and it usually led to sleepless nights, muscle pains, migraines, and wild mood swings. Find ways to get out of your head, like exercise or dancing nasty or some kind of tactile hobby. Also, find a good therapist.

### **8. What authors or books inspired you to become a writer?**

There were plenty of books I loved as a kid, like *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, which I read all of and sat outside crying after finishing the final book. Mainly though, I started writing because I'm from a family of storytellers. My mom, my grandma, and my aunts and uncles loved recounting events from their own lives or stories they'd heard. Some were mundane and some were profound, and everything in between. I recognized that they loved weaving events into narratives, that they did so compulsively and joyfully and tearfully. My grandma wrote stories and songs, my mom wrote poetry, and then, when I was old enough, I did the same. My high school English teacher, Mr. Barrett, was the first person to pull me aside and tell me I was good at writing. It hadn't occurred to me that I could be good at anything. That's the point where I stopped thinking of it as a thing I just did because it came naturally and started thinking of it as a skill I could improve and really use.

## Q&A WITH BRITTANY

### **9. What are some of the books you've been reading recently? Any books you're looking forward to?**

Most recently, I read the first two books of *The Indian Lake Trilogy* by Stephen Graham Jones and loved them so deeply. I love to be emotionally devastated, so two other books that did that exquisitely for me this year were *The Prophets* by Robert Jones Jr. and *There There* by Tommy Orange. There are a few books I'm very excited for! My friend and cohort member, Darius Stewart wrote a lyrical memoir called *Be Not Afraid of My Body*. He's a truly incredible poet whose work always leaves me feeling warm and hypnotized, like I just finished dancing all night. My dear friend Sarah Hollowell wrote a YA horror novel called *What Stalks Among Us* about two friends who get trapped in a time-looping corn maze and have to try to find their way out while also navigating their traumas. I read an early draft of this book and I think it's going to be really important for a lot of people, myself included. Another fellow NWP graduate and friend of mine, Nicolás Medina Mora Perez, wrote a book of autofiction called *América del Norte*. The parts I've read are sweeping and grand, and I'm severely excited to read the whole thing. Truly, I have a lot of very talented writer friends who are putting out work that makes me so happy I learned how to read.

### **10. Are you doing more writing? What other projects are coming up for you?**

If I could, I would turn into a mole and tunnel down into the earth and never write another book, but alas, I am compelled to keep pursuing this incredibly stressful endeavor. I'm currently working on my next book of nonfiction, and then I have two other nonfiction books and a novel in my heart. One of my dreams is to write for TV because I love screenwriting and collaborative creation. My friend Rachel and I have a whole show planned out, so if you're reading this and you want two very passionate freaks in your writers' room, hit me up.

# GROUP JOURNALING

Even with a group of trusted friends and family, there are some things that are difficult to say aloud. It is often hard to find the right words, and writing provides a more private way to work through things. If some of the group discussion questions felt too difficult to share aloud, journaling can provide the space to navigate how you feel without having to verbalize those feelings.

## **For this exercise, you will need:**

- **Paper**
- **Pencils**
- **Timer/clock**

This activity will be less structured than the group discussion. It is sometimes easier to work through difficult memories and emotions without being confined to specific questions. This activity is designed to be a free-writing session. You can write down scattered thoughts, random memories, bullet points, or paragraphs. This activity is completely individualized.

If you are unsure of where to begin, start by thinking about the group discussion. What thoughts or feelings did you have that you might not have shared with the group?

## **Instructions:**

After reading through the above as a group, get ready to begin journaling.

Find a comfortable place wherever you are. The group doesn't have to remain in one place for this activity. It may be more comfortable for some members to go into a different room. Go wherever you feel comfortable.

Have one member of the group set a 15-minute timer, and then start writing!

Afterward, come back together as a group and reflect on the time you each spent writing. Talk less about the specifics of what each group member wrote and more about how the activity made you feel.

Did you enjoy journaling? Do you make time for journaling in your regular life? If so, how does journaling benefit you? If not, would you consider doing so in the future? Did you enjoy this activity?

## MINDFULNESS ACTIVITY: PLANTING

Brittany practices mindfulness and tries to incorporate it into her everyday life. She says: “I tend to go on autopilot a lot... I like to take time throughout my day to just [be mindful and] think about the moment I’m in.” To hear her speak more about this, you can watch [this](#) video.

Mindfulness activities are great for relieving the stresses of everyday life, and they can be a really fun group activity as well. Mindfulness activities in a group setting allow each member to practice interior mindfulness while being in the company of those they trust.

Brittany is a gardener, and one great mindfulness activity is planting! In *Hell If We Don't Change Our Ways*, Brittany recalls the time she grew her own pumpkins. In that part of the book, she recounts her emotions, the result of her efforts, and how they paralleled other aspects of her life. Her experience with planting reveals themes of life, growth, and perseverance. While growing pumpkins may not be the best book club activity, planting anything is a great way to practice mindfulness!



# MINDFULNESS ACTIVITY: PLANTING

## Egg Carton Planting

### **What you need:**

- Leftover egg cartons
- Potting soil
- Seeds
- Knife
- Marker

### **Instructions:**

- Use a knife to poke drainage holes in the bottom of each cell of the egg carton.
- Lightly fill each egg tray cell with potting soil.
- Make indentations in the center of each cell. For smaller seeds, make a few smaller holes instead of one large one.
- If you have different types of seeds, label each cell with the name of the seed variety.
- Drop the seeds in the holes.
- Gently replace the soil to cover the seeds.
- Water the soil. It is important not to over or under water your seeds—just enough for the soil to be damp.
- Set the seeds where they can grow! Try to find a warm and light-filled location, and water as needed.

Take your cartons home and watch as they grow! To continue this mindfulness practice, take note of the growth on a regular basis. While life moves so quickly that it can be easy to miss the details, focusing on this slow growth allows you to bring mindfulness into your everyday routine.

# MINDFULNESS ACTIVITY: YOGA

Yoga is an amazing mindfulness practice. As a group, here are some poses you can work through together!

## What you need:

- Yoga mats (If you don't have, that's okay! Just find a surface where you can safely get into poses without slipping.)

While practicing yoga, you might enjoy having some background music. Check out [\*\*Brittany's playlist!\*\*](#)

For this practice, you can focus on getting into certain poses and holding them, rather than moving quickly through an intense flow. This allows you to center your breathing, which is what makes yoga such a wonderful mindfulness practice. Here are some great poses to try, and their benefits:

## *Sukhasana*

### Easy seat

This is a good pose to begin with, as this simple posture is easy on the body, allowing you to focus on your breath. Simply come into an easy seat, crossing your legs. Relax your face, jaw, and stomach—focus on breathing in and out through your nose. Close your eyes. You can have your palms flat against the thighs or facing up towards the sky. With each inhale and exhale, try to elongate your breath.



# MINDFULNESS ACTIVITY: YOGA

## *Paschimottanasana*

### **Seated forward bend**

This pose helps to relieve stress and calm the brain. From a seated posture, simply start to reach forward. You can let the head hang and breathe into this stretch. Stay here for 5-10 breaths and then gently come out of this posture.



## *Baddha Konasana*

### **Butterfly pose**

Moving from a regular seated position, bring the soles of the feet to touch, in the shape of a butterfly. Here, you can remain upright or begin to walk the hands forward, breathing into the stretch. You will feel this stretch more into your hips, where a lot of tension and stress is held.



## *Tadasana*

### **Mountain pose**

You can end your practice in this pose that symbolizes balance and strength. Standing on two feet, allow the palms to face front. Stand tall and widen the chest. You can reach the arms overhead for a stretch or you can close your eyes again. Focus on breathing and balancing, and thank yourself for this mindfulness practice.



# MINDFULNESS ACTIVITY: COLORING

Coloring is also an amazing mindfulness practice to lower stress and increase relaxation. Coloring uses the areas of the brain that enhance focus, concentration, and attention. Mindful coloring is the purposeful activity of paying attention to the present moment. Instead of being on autopilot, this activity forces you to notice the details.

## **What you need:**

- Computer paper
- Colored crayons or pencils

You can even purchase an [adult coloring book](#).

Now, begin drawing! If you need some inspiration, or just want to see some cool art, check out some [art from Brittany's family and friends](#).

While you color, it can be helpful to intentionally notice certain things:

- The color choices you make
- The tactile feel of your hand and fingers as you draw
- Where your brain starts to wander to as you color and draw