



READING GUIDE

1. What was your impression of Phoebe’s reaction to meeting her biological family and discovering that she was actually the second child born to Bea and Gus? Do you think Greta prepared her well enough for that encounter?
2. When Phoebe runs away and hides out in the O’Connors’ basement, do you think part of her was hoping Greta would come find her and bring her home? Even though she tells Greta not to (as does Luna), did Greta’s decision to honor that request affect Phoebe emotionally or psychologically?
3. How do the novel’s humorous and theatrical moments—like Phoebe’s dramatic haircut, her escape into Patrick’s chaotic household, and her time as Wanda at the Hardware Store—enhance our understanding of her identity crisis and emotional journey? Do these larger-than-life scenes reflect real emotional truths, or do they serve as a kind of performance for Phoebe herself?
4. The book centers on a classic allegorical journey: A girl undergoes a physical transformation that sparks both sexual and self-awakening. In what ways does Phoebe’s dramatic haircut help her break free from the expectations placed on her—and from her own insecurities? With that in mind, would you consider this a modern feminist allegory? Did you notice any other nods to fantasy or fairy tales throughout the book?

5. How did your impression of Phoebe and Luna’s friendship change over the course of the book? Did you find yourself questioning the depth of Luna’s love, as Phoebe still does many decades later? Or did you come to see Luna as emotionally manipulative from the start, as Chummy suggests when he reflects on the Barker women, saying: “They’d play with us . . . until they got tired”?

6. While staying at The Asylum, Phoebe forms several unexpected connections that shift the course of her life. Although she doesn’t seem to bear any resentment, did you feel that Miles took advantage of Phoebe? And what lasting impact did Patrick, Chummy, and Kelly each have on her journey?

7. Wanda Carol is both the name of Phoebe’s childhood doll and the persona she adopts as the vixen barmaid at the Hardware Store. Later, at the Pancake House, Phoebe wonders if the older waitress, Val, had “once been Wanda Carol—or was she the ghost of Wanda Carol visiting from the future?” Did you see Wanda Carol as a symbolic cautionary tale? If so, did you agree with Luna’s interpretation of the Hardware Store incident, as she later describes it in her self-help book? Or did you feel Phoebe was being honest about the experience and its value? Is it possible both versions hold truth?

8. What do you think caused the most damage to Phoebe and Luna’s friendship—ultimately breaking the close bond they shared in girlhood?

9. In the context of Women’s Rights in 1974—and Phoebe’s own experience as an adoptee—how did you respond to her decision to have the baby? How do you think her encounters with the various mother figures in her life—Bea, Greta, Mrs. Barker, and Bridge O’Connor—influenced that choice and shaped the kind of mother she ultimately becomes?

10. The narrator is Phoebe many years after the formative events of her youth took place. What does this suggest about how the past continues to shape the present? Why do you think Phoebe still struggles to let go of her past?

11. The novel weaves in many literary and musical references—Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Thomas Wolfe’s *Look Homeward, Angel*, Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, and more. What are some of your favorite books, music, or films from your own formative years, and how have they stayed with you over time?