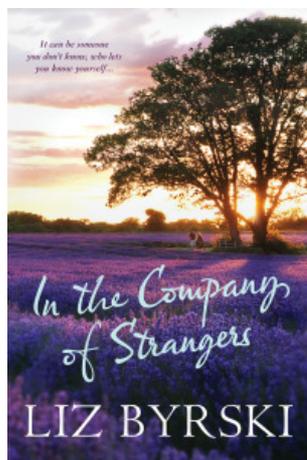


## BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION POINTS

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**Thank you for choosing *In the Company of Strangers* for your book club. Here are some discussion points you may like to use.**

Alice initially struggles after being released from prison, and despite being warned about the transition period, often feels overwhelmed. *"She was emotionally exhausted by almost two weeks of painful freedom"*.

How can freedom be painful? What supports do you think people would need to find their feet after leaving prison?

The central theme of this book is friendship. Thrown together largely as strangers, the friendships that grow between the different personalities in Declan, Ruby, Alice and Todd are forged by circumstances.

What do you think makes the friendships work? How much does the place itself play a part in the relationships that develop?

Ruby' horrific experiences as an enforced child migrant left her with many emotional scars that decades later still affect her decisions. Even to the point of not ever cutting her hair short.

We all have childhood baggage. How do we stop our childhood baggage from defining us? Why was the apology from the Australian Government to child migrants so important?

Lesley and Gordon find their expectations of retirement were vastly different from the reality. *"I don't want to do all those things we talked about. I want a different sort of life."* There are a lot of financial planning services and assistance provided in the lead up to retirement. However it seems like there is little support with the emotional and practical changes. What do you think this support **could** involve?

Both Alice and Ruby find relief in the process of telling their secrets. The morning after her secret is exposed Ruby thinks *"How odd, here I am walking along, humming the Seekers just hours after I've blurted out all the stuff I was never going to tell anyone. And yet somehow it feels okay – in fact it's very okay. The irony is that she has simply done – under pressure of circumstance – what she has so often encouraged other women to do: face what happened, talk about it, drag it out from under the carpet where it was swept years ago."*

We all have secrets. What makes them corrosive?

Alice recognises that the telephone number that her daughter Jacinta provided to her was a sign of trust. *"Jacinta has provided the number for, as Ruby rightly says, practical reasons, but in doing so she has trusted Alice not to use it for any other purpose"*.

How important is trust in the process of forgiveness and what does it take to trust again?

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Each of the characters at some point in their lives had to work out where they fitted – in terms of place and relationships.

How does our sense of identity get affected by being accepted by those around us?

When asked if she had forgiven Cat for having an affair with Harry, Ruby said *“I don’t know. That sounds silly but it’s true. You can say I forgive you, let’s put it all behind us, move on, all that stuff. But how do you know if, deep inside yourself, you’ve forgiven? How do you know if one day it might not all come back again, rising up inside you like some awful serpent?”*

Is it possible to truly forgive a betrayal of that magnitude? What do you think it would take to mend a relationship after betrayal?

In trying to understand her own marriage, Lesley ponders marriage breakdowns and what holds people together. *“Some of their friends had broken up after years together and she’d wondered why. What could happen in your fifties or sixties to make you want to change everything after decades together? Surely people knew each other well enough by then to work things out?”*

What do you think the pressures on a marriage are at that stage of life? What role does retirement play?

*“It seems as though everyone is waiting for enough time to pass to allow them to feel normal again. Not liking Paula, finding her difficult, frequently obnoxious, tolerating her in order to avoid confrontation, or simply feeling neutral, seems to make no difference to the level of dismay that people feel, nor the overbearing sadness that haunts Benson’s Reach.”*

Everyone was affected in different ways by Paula’s suicide and thought they should have seen the signs of her deteriorating mental health. Why do you think Paula took her own life? What were the signs? Could you see this coming as you were reading the book? Who, among the characters, might feel they could have made more of an effort with Paula and why?

I do hope you enjoy your discussion.