

THE ASTONISHING THING

Reading Group Guide

1. Were you as surprised as Boo was to find out where her mother, Carrie Sullivan, was living after she moved out? What did you think had happened to Carrie? Did your guess change over the course of the story, until you learned the truth?
2. Like a child, Boo had some understanding of what was going on in her family, but didn't always have the full picture. Was Boo a narrator you empathized with? Did you agree with her judgment most of the time?
3. Did your opinion of Carrie change as the book progressed? Did it change more than once? If so, how?
4. Which teenager did you think was more resilient after Carrie left, Mary or Jimmy? Did either of them react the way you think you would have if your mother moved out when you were that age? Jimmy and Mary continue to talk on the phone to and text their mother after she moves out; does today's technology make it easier for kids to keep in touch with their parents? Do you think they would have kept in such close touch with Tommy if he had been the one to leave?
5. Do you know anyone like Tommy Sullivan, who felt he needed to hide family problems from the outside world? Why do you think Tommy was so distrustful of people who weren't in his immediate family? Was it primarily due to a misunderstanding of mental illness, or the stigma attached to it, or a fear of doctors and hospitals, that stopped him from getting more help? Were his fears justified? Would you feel the same way, in his situation?
6. When a family member has mental illness, it is important to "see the person, not the illness", even when the person's words and behavior are hurtful. How hard do you imagine it is to do that? Was Boo able to do that? Were the other members of the Sullivan family able to do that?

7. Families and caregivers of persons with an illness often forget to—or don't have the time and ability to—take care of themselves. What could the Sullivan family have done better to help Carrie, and also to help themselves? Do you and your family have anything you do to alleviate stress during tough times?
8. Do you think Tommy's relationship with Charlotte will last over time? Why or why not? Why do you think Charlotte does not say "I love you" back to Tommy when he says it to her for the first time? Have you ever been in a relationship where you felt the other person was rushing into things? How did you resolve it?
9. Was Tommy's mother helpful to him, or did she make things harder for him? In what ways? Is there anything you think she could have done differently?
10. Do you think part of Tommy's desire for Carrie to come back was driven by his insecurities as a parent? Do you know anyone who has unexpectedly become a single parent and experienced similar doubts? Does Tommy provide his children with the love and support they need? Do his children to some degree end up parenting him?
11. Do you think pets provide comfort and stress relief in families? How so? Have your pets ever helped you through a tough time in your life?
12. Discuss the novel's title, *The Astonishing Thing*. What to you was the most astonishing thing that happened in the story? Does more than one thing come to mind?