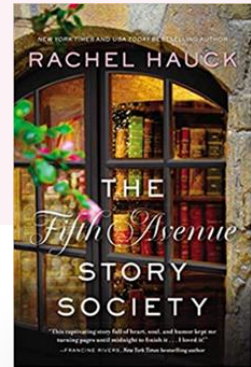




LEADER'S GUIDE

THE FIFTH AVENUE STORY SOCIETY BY RACHEL HAUCK



"Story doesn't have to be written... It can be told. Every day we listen to, live, and breathe stories. What we're doing right now is a story. People who would've otherwise never met are sharing a moment."

JETT WILDER

THEMES

Stories Love Healing Friendship Freedom Trauma Fear Belonging

HEADS UP! (TRIGGERS AND DELICATE TOPICS)

Family Violence Addiction Death

CHARACTERS

Lexa, AN ambitious and career-driven young woman, deeply desires to fit in and feel needed. After spending her childhood hopping from country to country, never quite able to form any deep and meaningful relationships outside her immediate family, she struggles to find a 'home' where she belongs. Deep seeds of rejection plague her ability to attain the feeling of belonging she seeks. After her divorce, she throws her entire being into her work as an executive assistant, gunning for the CEO job that she believes will fulfil her.

Jett is a writer, a literature professor, and a hopeless romantic. Preferring the comfort and familiarity of a brilliantly written story, he immerses himself in his idol's - Gordon Phipps Roth - books and pines away for a life story like those on the pages he cherishes so dearly. Broken-hearted after a divorce and hidden in a protective moody shell after his brother's sudden death, he has almost accepted his miserable existence and broken relationships as the way things are, out of his control and his lot in life.

Ed, a lonely, elderly widow, welcomes the Story Societies friendships and revels in the expertise he can draw on to help him write his life's memoirs and story with long lost wife Esmerelda. The story of his incredible loving marriage, which he intends on writing, fortuitously begins to fall apart as the truth he has been hiding

is revealed. Through the newly found friendships, love, and encouragement, he begins to truly see his story and experiences immeasurable freedom and healing in the process.

Coral, an heiress to her grandmother's multi-million dollar cosmetics empire and on the cusp of losing the company, passionately follows Jesus and her newly found faith. Navigating faith and obedience, Coral gives up her prince charming to seek Jesus and lives with a hopeful expectation of a story with a happy ending. She is an elegant, kind, sweet-spirited and loving woman who, despite feeling like an outsider at times and overwhelmed with her company, flourishes in her faith and acts as a light in the Story Society.

Chuck, an Uber driver full of regret and longing to see his children, lives in a constant state of deep remorse and anguish over his outburst and uncontrolled anger, which led to the restraining order keeping him at a distance from his family. A little rough around the edges, he has a tender heart and welcomes the friendships within the story society. Never quite feeling good enough, he slowly finds a new purpose and way forward for his future and children.

STORYLINE

Jett, a hopeless romantic and recently divorced literature professor, finds a mysterious invite in his personal belongings envelope - a souvenir from his night in the slammer after an out of character drunken wedding brawl - and wonders, what in the world is the Fifth Avenue Story Society, and why was he invited?

Lexa, a workaholic who is desperately seeking community and acceptance, finds her society invite on her desk at ZB Enterprises; while Chuck, an angry Uber driver who just happened to be an accomplice to Jett's fight (despite being strangers), finds his invite waiting for him on his passenger seat.

Coral, known as the "Panicked Princess" (after leaving her royal fiancé at the alter), finds her invite amongst her chaotic work environment as the president of a vast makeup empire. Ed is just aching to write his life's memoirs with his beloved lost wife Esmerelda and believes the Story Society is precisely the place to make it happen.

Amongst the suspense and excitement of the very first meeting at the mysterious Fifth Avenue Story Society, we are progressively introduced to Jett, Lexa, Chuck, Coral and Ed. It is revealed that Jett and Lexa were once married (evident to the others through the animosity between them), and even though Lexa finds the meeting a little unsettling, she agrees - as does everyone else - to continue to meet, despite not knowing by who or why they have been invited.

As the group spend more time together, their lives become intertwined. Friendships blossom, secrets are shared, and they learn to help one another carry their heavy burdens.

Lexa and Jett, after a long and gruelling battle, discover the true reasons their marriage fell apart but also find that their marriage can be restored. The restoration originates with Lexa's unfortunate accident that leaves her with a broken arm and in need of constant care - which Jett so lovingly and unexpectedly provides. The journey, which exposes the hidden trauma behind Jett's brother's death and Lexa's need in striving to become CEO of ZB, also becomes the way back into each other's hearts.

Coral and Chuck's romance comes and goes in waves as she struggles to run a seemingly failing company. Through hard work and an honest staff member, Coral realises her most trusted staff are stealing profits and fudging all the numbers. Meanwhile, Chuck tries everything in his power to be a part of his kid's lives after his tragic outburst of anger which endangered his children and resulted in a heavily enforced restraining order.

Ed, who seems to be the only one who really "has it together", finds the story he has been attempting to write about the "perfect" marriage and life with Esmerelda, unravelling before his eyes. The truth behind the

pain and disappointment is too much to bear. His concocted story - born out of fear and failure - is disintegrating.

Reaching the story's climax, Coral boldly shares her newfound faith in Jesus Christ with the group and begins officially dating Chuck, who welcomes Jesus into his life - albeit in baby steps. He releases his magic book stories, which leads to him sharing his deepest regrets on national TV and finding his court-ordered absence from his children's lives eased. Ed's tragic true story of his beloved Esmerelda's drug addiction and death is heartbreakingly and authentically shared with the group. This leaves him free to live his life unburdened by his past and ready to court Miss Mabel from down the hall. Jett finally finds the courage to expose his literary idol Gordon Phipps Roth as a fraud. At the same time, Lexa thrives in her new role as CEO at CCW and fully embraces her reignited relationship with Jett as they again tie the knot.

Although the "who" and "how" of the Fifth Avenue Story Society is never truly understood by the group, everyone comes away deeply changed, healed, and better off for the loving and authentic relationships developed within the walls of the cosy little library.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & TALKING POINTS

1

Q. Which of the five characters, Lexa, Jett, Ed, Coral and Chuck, did you relate to the most? Why?

TALKING POINTS

Some reasons we may relate to a particular character could be;

- Empathy/Sympathy
- Pity
- Similar character traits
- Similar circumstances
- Similar desires, hopes or dreams
- Similar mistakes made in our own lives
- We may like or dislike particular characters

2

Q. "Go on in. Discover your story." (p27). Would you accept an invitation to a mysterious society? Are you an extrovert who might have been ready and willing to form fast friends, or are you more introverted or reserved in front of strangers?

TALKING POINTS

Answers may vary and could include;

Yes;

- Curiosity would have gotten the better of me.
- I love meeting new people.
- I am confident in front of people I do not know.

No;

- I am too shy.

- I would fear meeting strangers, being somewhere I did not know or talking in front of a group.
- It could have been a hoax or a trick.

Each person has been gifted with their own unique personality from the Lord, allow even those who are shy or timid to share a bit of how they may or may not like to socialise with others - extroverts are likely to jump in and quickly share their thoughts.

3

Q. "Courage isn't the absence of fear... It's going forward anyway." (p14). Fear is a theme in 'The Fifth Avenue Story Society'. Did you recognise any of your fears in the fictional characters? Share some strategies you may have used to help overcome your fears.

TALKING POINTS

Common fears from the book;

- Regrets and poor decisions of the past affecting the future.
- Forming new relationships or friendships.
- Failure.
- Acknowledging past trauma.
- Admitting the truth or sharing long-kept secrets.
- Feeling unworthy or unlovable.
- Being an outsider or not finding a home.
- Not being valued by those around us or worrying about how we are perceived.

Strategies to overcome fear (From It's *Okay Not to be Okay* by Sheila Walsh);

- F... fall on your face before Him.
- E... earnestly seek Him.
- A... ask Him to give you His peace.
- R... rest in His presence.
- "For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of sound mind" (2 Tim 1:7).
- Trust God that He will take care of all your needs.
- Do it afraid.
- Ask for great faith to believe and trust God, so you do not fear.

4

Q. "Isn't it nice, Lexa, when someone steps up once in a while? It doesn't make you less strong to need and accept help" (p153). Can you relate to Lexa's unwillingness to accept help? Or do you gladly accept help when you need it?

TALKING POINTS

Answers may vary but could include;

- I do not like receiving help.
- Having to ask others for help makes me feel silly, weak, incapable or embarrassed.
- I ask for help when I need it.
- I enjoy receiving help from others.

We are designed to live in a community, which also means giving and receiving; both offering and taking help from those around us. Although it is blessed work to offer help to those in need, when

you accept the offer of help from another, you also allow that person to do a "good deed" and be blessed themselves. Encourage the women to ponder what kind of attitude they might have the next time someone offers help or when they are in a position where they need to ask for help.

5

Q. *Chuck's Story*; Family Violence is a severe and genuine issue many women and children face today. When we meet Chuck and learn his story - which includes a terrible outburst of anger, with a weapon, in front of his children - we also see a very heartbroken, regretful and repentant man who would do anything he could to take it back. Living with the consequences of our sin can sometimes feel unbearable, and his ex-wife Trudy rightly or wrongly withholds his children from him.

Who did you sympathise with more? Trudy for protecting her children, or repentant Chuck desperately seeking forgiveness and a second chance with his kids? Why?

TALKING POINTS

There is no right or wrong answer to this question. Opinions shared will likely be formed from life experience. Allow everyone to share while encouraging a safe and authentic conversation.

Answers may vary and could include;

- Chuck deserves to see his children again because he is repentant and trying to change.
- Chucks punishment 'fits' his crime.
- A dad should be a part of his children's lives.
- Chuck should not be punished for his mistake.
- Chuck's punishment is too severe; maybe he should have supervised visits to help repair the damage.
- Trudy is doing the right thing keeping herself and her children safe.
- Trudy should be more forgiving and allow Chuck access to his children.

If any women in your group are domestic abuse survivors, you may like to consider whether this question would be beneficial for your group.

If a woman shares that she is currently experiencing abuse within her family home, ensure she is safe and follow your churches/organisations and state mandatory reporting and pastoral care processes. Remember, as a women's group leader, you can pray with her, love her, and help practically by providing a safe place – however, in most cases, these circumstances require professional help and support is needed (through the Police, Church Leadership, Counsellors and so on).

6

Q. *Lexa's Story*; "Here we are in our thirties dealing with childhood wounds" (Lexa, p261). Have you found yourself as an adult, "dealing" with childhood wounds? How did you experience freedom from addressing issues in your past?

TALKING POINTS

Common coping mechanisms for pain and trauma in this story include;

- Learning to detach (p101).
- Running or calling it quits when life gets tough (p191).
- People pleasing.
- Misplaced identity; career, relationships, idols.

- Created reality (remembering only the good moments so the hurts of the past are forgotten).
- Bottling up or ignoring hurts, offences, emotions, and traumatic events.
- Uncontrolled anger and violence.
- Substance abuse.

Common methods used to address pain and trauma to experience freedom in this story include;

- Reliance, obedience, and trust in Jesus.
- Telling others about trauma and pain in a safe and loving environment (p264).
- Viewing life as it is, not as it ought to be or was imagined to be.
- Telling the truth about secrets which have been kept.
- Changing perspective.

Some trauma and pain are severe and cannot be "dealt with" simply by being shared with others or looking at life differently. Experiences such as abuse, rejection, abandonment, divorce, death of a loved one, betrayal, substance abuse (and many more) can cause an individual significant pain, hinder or debilitate their ability to live their lives and maintain healthy relationships. Although the Lord is powerful enough to miraculously set people free from these things (and certainly does!), often, at the right time, He calls us to journey alongside Him and be set free. This process can take a long, long time. Often God provides just what we need to take the journey, including life-giving Christian community, Health Professionals, close friendships, medication, and Biblical resources to encourage and strengthen us.

7

Q. *Jett's story*, Jett is haunted by the ghost of his dead brother (p264) and burdened by the broken relationship with his mum (p260). Can you relate to Jett's feelings of abandonment and betrayal? How did you find the courage to forgive the person who hurt you?

TALKING POINTS

It is not wrong to struggle to forgive those who have hurt us, but it is wrong to refuse to forgive someone blatantly. God does not call us to 'forgive all who have wronged us' if we cannot do so. Let us remember a few things;

- We can forgive others because Jesus forgives us.
- The Holy Spirit works in our hearts, giving us the ability to forgive people when they do not deserve it (just as we are undeserving of God's forgiveness).
- Forgiveness is not a feeling; it is a daily decision and can take time to experience fully.
- Forgiveness frees our souls and prevents us from becoming bitter, resentful, and hateful.
- Forgiveness is not a "calling" for a few, yet a requirement for all who walk with Jesus.
- Our heart postures are crucial and what the Lord examines; If you feel unable to forgive someone, pray fervently for the Lord to enable you to forgive them and to see them through his eyes – as a person created in his image.

A fantastic resource to help those battling unforgiveness is *The Bait of Satan* John Bevere.

8

Q. *Coral's Story*, "The God sized hole in her soul was too vast and deep for any man to fill. Except her saviour" (p321). Do you struggle to allow God to fill that 'God sized hole' in your soul?

TALKING POINTS

Allowing God to fill that hole requires;

- Obedience, faith, contentment, trust, and the fruits of the spirit (especially His supernatural peace and joy during suffering).
- A daily decision of faith and may be harder during trials and temptation than from the mountain top.
- For us to fix our eyes upon Jesus and not our circumstances.
- For us to hold onto our hope of joy of salvation even amongst the storms.
- We need to see with our heavenly eyes, not our earthly eyes.

Why can it be hard to allow God to meet our needs?

- Trust (do we truly trust He has our best interest at heart? Do we believe He will work everything together for our good? do we believe He is sovereign?).
- Faith (are we faith-filled? do we need to pray for the gift of great faith?).
- Have we seemingly been 'let-down' before? Did we trust God, and everything seemed to fail, and we still do not see the complete picture or understand?.
- Hurts and Offences (have we been hurt and let down by others and assume God will do the same?).
- God's Promises (do we believe God's promises are meant for us, or just everyone else?).
- Do we feel unworthy? (we are - Jesus makes us ALL worthy).

9

Q. *Ed's Story*; "You actually have a great love story. You loved when it wasn't easy." (p339). Can you share a time in your life when you have been unconditionally loved by someone or have loved someone else unconditionally yourself? Especially when it was hard and/or underserved?

TALKING POINTS

Answers may vary and could include;

- Mental Illness (depression, post-natal depression, anxiety).
- Physical health issues (chronic illness, fatal diagnosis, cancer, or short-term health concerns such a broken bone, minor injuries).
- Circumstantial and challenging seasons of life (job loss, overwhelm, stress, early motherhood).
- Loss (death of a loved one, miscarriage, redundancy, or career change).
- Broken family relationships (divorce, tense in-law relationships, sibling rivalry).
- Hurts, offence, jealousy, gossip (between friends or family).
- Within marriage or immediate family (grace for spouses or children).

One of the true signs of a Christian living a life following Jesus is the ability to love others well; love your neighbour as yourself (Galatians 5:14). The Holy Spirit gives us the ability to love unconditionally; outside of Christ, we are incapable of this kind of love because when we reject God, we reject love itself - God is love (1 John 4:16).

10

Q. "She hated endings. But if things didn't end, where would all the amazing beginnings be?" (p314). Everything has its season, and sometimes we have to say goodbye to good things to make way for better things. Has this been true in your life? What do you love most about new beginnings?

TALKING POINTS

Just as nature goes through the seasonal changes of summer, autumn, winter, and spring - as do our lives. We need and experience all the seasons throughout our lives;

- Summer; to celebrate and rejoice.
- Autumn; to examine ourselves, prune away the baggage and sin, and allowing great change to occur in our hearts.
- Winter; to rest, mourn, slow, quietly ponder, seek counsel.
- Spring; blossom and thrive.

As each season ends a new begins, some last a long time while others may be sweet and short. Each season is crucial and unavoidable for our personal growth and relationship building with the Lord.

We are called to worship, joy, peace, and thanksgiving during every season. Pray for each woman in the group, for their current season, for exciting new beginnings and direction, endurance, faith, and obedience for the coming season.



ADDITIONAL NOTES FOR LEADERS

Discussion questions from the author are available at the back of the book. You may like to encourage your group to reflect on these questions before your monthly meeting and keep a reflective journal to record their notes. These questions will allow your book club sisters to examine the text before the meeting. As the month progresses, you may like to discuss these through your group's online platform (a Facebook group/ messenger or whatsapp chat group etc.) to keep connected and engaged throughout the month.

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