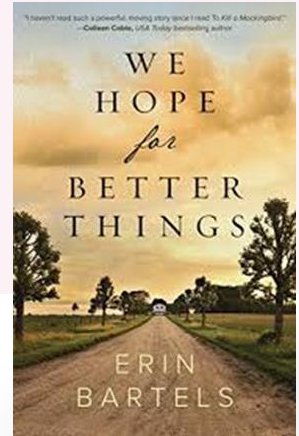




LEADER'S GUIDE

WE HOPE FOR BETTER THINGS BY ERIN BARTELS



We hope for better things; it will rise from the ashes.

DETROIT CITY MOTTO

THEMES

Racism Identity Fear Love Trauma History Family War

HEADS UP! (TRIGGERS AND DELICATE TOPICS)

Racism Violence Infant Loss Slavery

CHARACTERS

Elizabeth Balsam is a young, dedicated, and passionate journalist for the Free Press. Known in Detroit and journalism circles as the "woman who exposed people", both feared and respected by many, Elizabeth's career consumes her life - and fulfills her. She finds immense satisfaction in exposing the bad guys and seeking justice for the oppressed, yet when she loses her job after a botched undercover story is revealed, she no longer knows who she is. Growing up in the faith, she believes in a God, but the suffering she has witnessed makes her cynical and reluctant to believe that He cares. Elizabeth goes on a journey of self-discovery, and while exploring her family history, she begins to learn where she has come from. Once the riddle has been slowly put together, she finds herself considering that maybe God is in control after all.

Eleanor (Nora) is a pretty, brave, and kind young woman who grows up in a wealthy home where her parents control her life. When her path crosses with photographer and artist William, she begins to fall in love with him. She decides that she will risk everything to be with him, knowing interracial marriage is frowned upon by many and despised by others. Despite loving William, Nora is still impacted by deeply ingrained prejudices and bitterness towards Williams family after his disappearance during the 1960's Detroit Riot's, takes root in her heart. For over 50 years, Nora holds onto unforgiveness until Elizabeth helps her find the missing pieces and heal what has been shattered.

Mary Balsam, once a tender-hearted young woman - is forced to become strong, independent, and hardworking during the Civil War. Suffering the loss of her first child and feeling neglected and bitter towards her husband, she is left alone to manage the family farm, which becomes a refuge for runaway

slaves. Mary passionately defends the rights of freed slaves, spurred on by her faith and belief that God created all people equally; this is one of her strongest qualities. Her life becomes even more complicated as she falls in love with escaped slave George and emotionally neglects her sons and husband. Her sons despise the ex-slaves and break the cycle of compassion to all persons, which Mary and her husband Nathaniel were intent on role modelling. Instead of leaving the legacy, they'd hoped, Mary's relationship with her son George is damaged, and she begins to loathe him uncharacteristically. He grows to be full of hate and anger. This leads to her accidental death - yet in her final moments, she cries out to the Lord in repentance for her sin and forgiveness.

STORYLINE

1860's; Mary Balsam, Lapeer Farmhouse

- Young, married, and pregnant, Mary reluctantly farewells her husband Nathaniel, a passionate abolitionist who has enlisted to fight in the civil war.
- A runaway slave knocks on Mary's door seeking water and aid, which Mary provides.
- Mary finds herself and Bridget alone, trying to manage the isolated farm.
- Nathaniel's suitcase arrives without warning, and thinking the worst, Mary assumes he has been killed in battle - but to her shock, George, a runaway slave, is hidden in the case.
- Mary's shock and overwhelm sends her into premature labour, and she gives birth to a stillborn baby while George is the only person by her side.
- George is nursed back to health and begins to work the farm with Mary and Bridget; together, the farm not only thrives but becomes a refuge for other runaway slaves.
- Mary and George fall in love. They begin to write secret letters without disclosing their true feelings yet forming a deep bond.
- Nathaniel briefly returns home from war, resumes the running of the farm, and employs other freed slaves for whom he provides lodgings in his attic.
- Nathaniel leaves to fight again, and Mary gives birth to their son, whom she names George.
- Mary soon realises that Nathaniel has been visiting a town prostitute and, in a moment of despair, reveals the extent of her true affections for George in a letter that is accidentally sent to Nathaniel.
- Once Nathaniel returns from the war, he and Mary settle into farm life. Mary has two more sons, Jonathan and Benjamin. Little George grows up despising the freed slaves and his mother's obvious affection for George. He resents his life and the teasing he endures from the other town children.
- Little George's anger and resentment towards 'Big George', leads him to betray the family and make a deal with Mr Sharpe, who had previously threatened Mary for housing freed slaves.
- Mary and George's cart wheel breaks while returning from a town trip, and while alone, they commit adultery. During this, the farm has been attacked, and six men murdered due to little George's conniving with Mr Sharpe.
- Mary gives birth to another baby, and it's immediately apparent George is the father. Knowing this child would bring shame to the whole family, the midwife smuggles the child out of the home and replaces him with the town prostitute's baby, who looks uncannily like Nathaniel.
- To rid himself of 'Big George', Little George poisons George's food, which is accidentally served up to his mother, Mary. Just before her death, she tells George about his son and repents from her sin and mistakes.

1960's; Eleanor (Nora) Balsam

- Nora finds herself face to face with a confronting photo of her father in an art gallery. To have the picture removed from the artist's exhibit, she engages in a conversation with William. Agreeing to replace his broken camera in exchange for the incriminating photo, Nora finds herself giving William her phone number in the hopes of seeing some of his new pictures in which she is the subject.
- Nora and William meet at a diner, and after their meal, head to William's home, where Nora is given her photographs and falls in love with William.
- William and Nora begin dating, but they keep their relationship secret because interracial relationships are despised by many.
- After attending Martin Luther King's arena message, Nora decides it's time to act and end segregation. She suggests to William that they ought to be married the following day they exchange vows.
- Nora attempts to introduce her parents to William and is shocked at her father's intense anger and disapproval. She is given an ultimatum, get the marriage annulled or be cut off from her parents, their wealth, and her 'future'.
- After countless failed attempts to find somewhere safe to live together, Nora and William accept Mallory's (Nora's mother) offer to move into the family home in Lapeer.
- Nora has a miscarriage which devastates her and drives a wedge further between herself and her mother.
- Nora begins learning about her family history and Mary Balsam from her great Aunt Margaret (who is the prostitute's daughter, not Mary's biological child).
- Nora reluctantly sends Nathaniel off to the Detroit Riots to look for his nephew J.J. and never sees him again.

Current Day; Elizabeth Balsam

- Elizabeth reluctantly meets with Mr Rich, who offers her a deal; never-before-seen photographs from the 1960's Detroit Riots, in exchange for her contacting her long lost relative Eleanor Balsam.
- Elizabeth's journalism career ends at the Free Press as she is exposed in her undercover role as 'Dana', a false persona created to collect information on Judge Ryan Sharpe, who she believes is hiding information regarding the Detroit Riots.
- After losing her career, Elizabeth decides to accept Mr Rich's deal to secure the photos in hopes of restoring her journalism career.
- Elizabeth arrives in Lapeer and meets an elderly Nora. Strategically, yet unsuccessfully, Elizabeth attempts again and again to raise the subject of the Detroit Riots. With no luck, she resorts to snooping around the home, building a vegetable garden, and making friends with Tyrone, a local owner of the gardening store.
- Becoming more intrigued by the farm and its history, Elizabeth tries to put all the story pieces together, and Nora begins to share the family history.
- Elizabeth is offered a job at Beat magazine. She internally battles with the decision to take the job and return to her life in Detroit or to remain in Lapeer and care for Nora, whose health is rapidly declining.
- After contacting Mr Rich, Elizabeth arranges a visit to share what he knows about the Riots. It's revealed that Mr Rich is William's nephew J.J., and was with William when he was shot and killed by Judge Ryan Sharpe during the Detroit Riots.
- Nora finally has closure over William's death and permits the photographs from the Riot to be made into a book to honour William.
- Elizabeth remains in Lapeer and takes over the farm and sewing business after Nora dies.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & TALKING POINTS

1

Q. Elizabeth, Eleanor, and Mary are separated over generations, yet their lives are beautifully linked together through family history and the Lapeer Farmhouse. Which character 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. Mr Rich asks Elizabeth, "Do you believe he [God] works all things together for his glory?". Initially, Elizabeth disagrees, saying the world is 'too messed up'. How does this opinion change throughout the story? How have you come to believe this is true?

TALKING POINTS

At the beginning of the novel, Elizabeth does not believe in the goodness and promises of God;

- She is disheartened over the loss of her job; "How do you explain the feeling that life is over when there's nothing wrong except the fact that you lost a job" (p254).
- She does not believe she can depend on God; "I found God less dependable so I got less dependable too" (p136).

As Elizabeth's knowledge of herself, her family history and God grows, she begins to believe;

- God's will is better; "I have a better job now. A better life. I'm good" (p372).
- God is sovereign and can work out our lives, even if we make mistakes, "Whatever you chose to do, God can use that. Life is always a winding path. It's only in retrospect that it appears to be a straight and inevitable one" (p316 - Elizabeth's Mother).
- That "everything happens for a reason, maybe you'll look back and see that this was the best thing that could happen to you" (p271 - Tyrese).

Allow the women space to share how they have learned to trust that God works ALL things for our good and His glory.

3

Q. A theme in the novel is "Sins of Omission". Described on page 30 as "plain old garden variety neglect", which do "as much damage... as corruption and greed". How has reading this novel changed your views on 'doing nothing' or 'turning a blind eye'?

TALKING POINTS

You may like to consider those in the book which identified themselves as Christians and were against slavery yet reluctant to help.

As a group, you may like to consider the following things;

- How have Christians (in general) failed or succeeded in response to racism and inequality?
- Is it biblical to 'do nothing'?
- "What of honour and Christian duty?" (Nathaniel - p54)
- What will we teach our children through our actions or inaction?

Some examples to be found throughout the book;

- Sadie, the Pastors wife, wanting segregated churches (p285).
- Reverend Whittaker and the issues surrounding ex-slaves attending the church services (p155).
- William's family history, and the injustice suffered through lynching (p275).

Biblical Examples;

- The book of Jeremiah; the Israelites were charged with the sin of neglecting the care of orphans, widows, the poor, oppressed, and sick through the Lord's prophet Jeremiah.
- Paul's letter to Philemon; a plea for Onesimus, a runaway slave to be forgiven and accepted as a brother in Christ. "If you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me" Phil 1:17.

Please anticipate a passionate discussion on this issue. It is OK for your group to share different opinions and experiences if the conversation is kept life-giving. If it begins to get heated, or two individuals are arguing different viewpoints and dominating the conversation, move on by suggesting they continue the conversation at a later stage.

4

Q. In this story, many characters show that they have prejudice and fears towards those who are different from themselves. What can we do to help remove these barriers?

TALKING POINTS

Examples from the book;

- "Us and them" (p68).
- Nora wonders if JJ hates her just because she is white (p278).
- Williams friend Arnold; "Your girl is everyone's concern. Your girl is gonna get someone killed" (p125).
- Diane's racism towards William (p32).
- The man at the movie theatres who was victim blaming and wanting to pick a fight with Tyrese (p183-184).

Some suggestions for how we might remove barriers;

- Re-gain our childlike discernment of people being people (we are all human beings); Margaret's innocence of not knowing the difference between races "they were just my family" (p260).
- Speak Biblical truth; We are all image bearers of one true living God (Genesis 1:27), there is no longer Slave, Gentile, Greek, Male or Female, yet all created equal and one in Christ (Galatians 3:28).
- Seek justice for the oppressed, speak out for those who need help, pray for all people.

5

Q. Were any unknown prejudices of your own revealed to you while reading this book? You may like to prayerfully examine your own heart and ask God to show any beliefs about others that do not align with His views about them.

TALKING POINTS

Many of us have unrealised prejudices. They may develop through fear, lack of understanding, experience, or the influence of those around us.

Some of Nora's unrealised prejudices include;

- A reluctance to trust William because of his skin colour (p21).
- Refusing a date with William because of his skin colour (p146).
- Regarding Williams photo, Nora thought her Father was the victim and William must have been to blame (p21&22).

Spend some time in prayer at the end of the session, asking the Lord to reveal the true condition of your hearts. Pray that God would give us eyes to see all people through His loving, compassionate, and non-discriminatory eyes.

6

Q. "She cried out for her impossible love, for her betrayal of her husband, for his betrayal of her, for her selfishness, and for her baby who had been stolen from her. In her sorrowful moans were all the words she felt she could not utter aloud before God and man, her full confession and cry for forgiveness" (p327). At this moment, we see Mary's complete despair as she holds nothing back and cries out to the Lord in anguish, regret, fear, repentance, and heartbreak. Can you relate to Mary's prayers, which come from a place of deep hurt? How did the Holy Spirit meet you in this place and give you comfort through the storm?

TALKING POINTS

We all sin and must live with the consequences. Sometimes, sins consequences are almost too much to bear, yet we know when we repent, seek forgiveness, and return to the arms of our Heavenly Father, He forgives us. However, the universal law of reaping and sowing remains and often, so do the consequences of our sin.

The Holy Spirit is our helper and comforter. He prays on our behalf; "Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" Romans 8:28.

7

Q. "Real romance happens when you least expect it. That's what makes it romantic. I fell in love with William on a couch very much like this one after I'd embarrassed myself at an awkward lunch... I did everything wrong" (p330-331). Share a romantic story from your life.

TALKING POINTS

Nora - "I love him. If I don't marry him, that's what I'll regret" (p149).

Allow time for the women to share a brief story of how they met their husband or partner. Was it love at first sight? Did the love slowly blossom? Have fun with it!

8

Q. In her desperate situation, we see Louise Rich (William's mother) praying. "...Right now we got to pray. You understand? We got to pray like never before. You pray with me now, all right?" (p338). Can you share a time when you were in a crisis, and your only option was to pray and believe for a miracle?

TALKING POINTS

Answers may vary and could include;

- Health crisis
- Car Accident/injury
- Sudden death of a loved one
- Wayward children
- Family or marriage breakdown
- Financial crisis

9

Q. "I think I've spent the majority of my life mending things for other people while I've been walking around in tatters. Today has me wondering what the last fifty years might have been like if I had forgiven my parents and forgiven J.J. Maybe I would have been happier" (Nora, p369). The Bible is clear that we ought to forgive others as we have been forgiven (Luke 6:37). But how does forgiveness protect our hearts, and help us to live happier, freer lives?

TALKING POINTS

We all experience hurt and betrayal because of others sins towards us. It takes intentional effort, strength, love, and compassion to forgive, but it also takes immense energy not to forgive;

- "There are many people in this world I have not been able to forgive. My mother, my father and you... it took effort and sacrifice not to forgive them" (p360).
- "I kept looking at it so the hate I saw in your eyes for the man I love would become the hatred in my heart for you" (p322).
- Hatred, bitterness, revenge, and unforgiveness are heavy burdens to bear; they wear us down, causing grief and trauma, preventing us from healing.

Other peoples stories of kindness, love, healing and freedom can help us to heal;

- "My parents didn't stop at tending to the bodies of the people they served... they also tended to their souls. I could bring Nora firewood... but couldn't I also help heal her broken heart? (p272)".
- God comforts us so we can comfort others (2 Corinthians 1:4).

God is our ultimate comfort and peace. He WILL redeem it all;

- God will work everything together for His glory and the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28).
- Let the peace of Christ rule in your heart (Colossians 3:15).
- Come to me all who are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28).

Forgiveness does not excuse sin, hurt, or offence. Forgiveness is removing the debt owed to us, just as Jesus forgives our sin and removes our debt. It brings healing and freedom to us. Forgiveness can take time and is a choice we must enter into daily. We are capable of forgiveness because Christ forgives us.

10

Q. "Aunt Nora had been wrong when she said that history was written by the victors, for the victors in one generation may turn out to be the villains of the next. And the only way to get closer to the truth was to refuse to quit searching for it. All it took to lose one's history was a single generation that didn't take the time to learn it and pass it on. I would do my part to keep it alive." (Elizabeth p376)

What important idea, knowledge or dream will you try and keep alive for the next generation?

TALKING POINTS

Answers may vary and could include;

- Faith in Jesus Christ.
- Equality for all human beings.
- Family History.
- Demonstration of a Christ-centred marriage and/or family.
- A servant heart posture.
- The habit of Biblical gratitude.
- Knowledge of world history or significant events.
- Resilience and faith to weather the storms of life well.

Finish your discussion by praying for hearts and eyes which align with the Lord's;

- For all people to be seen the way He sees them (loved, equal, made in His image).
- For repentance and forgiveness for your prejudices.
- For ways in which you can help the oppressed, marginalised, and mistreated.



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