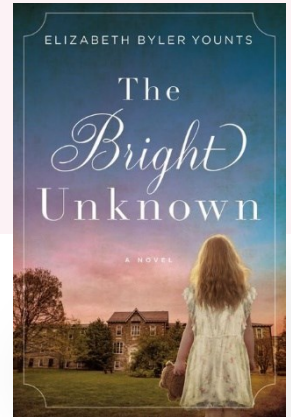




LEADER'S GUIDE

THE BRIGHT UNKNOWN BY ELIZABETH BYLER YOUNTS



"I live in a lunatic asylum with women considered insane and incurable – if they weren't crazy when they came, they are now. None of us can leave. We're all trapped. I'm trapped."

BRIGHTON FRIEDRICH

THEMES

Home

Identity

Trauma

Secrets

Mental Illness

Friendship

Resilience

HEADS UP! (TRIGGERS AND DELICATE TOPICS)

Mental health stigmatism

Abuse and barbaric treatment of people with mental illness

CHARACTERS

Brighton (Nell) is born and raised in Riverside Home where her mother is a patient receiving treatment for mental illness. Although she was loved and cared for as she grew up by her 'Nurse Joann', she deeply desires to uncover her past and escape. She wants a normal life outside the dreary walls of the asylum.

Angel (Luke) is Brighton's tender, faithful, and diligent companion. Affectionately named 'Angel' by Brighton because of his albinism, he longs to know his real name and find a place to belong.

Joann (Nurse) is more of a mother to Brighton than her biological mother. She deeply desires to provide a safe and loving upbringing for Brighton. Yet, in her attempt at keeping Brighton safe, she not only forfeits a family of her own but wrongly keeps secrets and makes poor decisions as the situation spirals out of her control.

STORYLINE

'The Bright Unknown' is a story about uncovering the truth, seeking a family, and finding somewhere to belong. The novel spans two timelines following Brighton's birth, upbringing, and daring escape from Riverside Home (Asylum) in the 1930s and 1940s and her adult life, known as Nell, in the 1990s.

1930s & 1940s

Born, raised, and educated at Riverside Home, Brighton is desperate for answers. She needs to know why she has been raised in the asylum by Nurse Joann, who her father is, and most importantly, what happened to her mother that made her a patient among the clinically insane. Amongst the hurt, betrayal and loneliness, Brighton's best friend, Angel, understands her and shares her affliction of being a sane person captive among the mentally ill, having been abandoned as a young child to Riverside because of his albinism.

Brighton and Angel know that their chances of escaping Riverside are dire – but a future there is devoid of hope. Angel, Brighton and their friend Grace make a promise to one another to escape and expose Riverside. One stormy evening they try unsuccessfully to escape. Tragically during the failed attempt, Brighton's mother falls to her death and Grace's horrific punishment after being caught is sterilisation. More than ever, the two know they must get out before something similar befalls them, and in a great show of compassion and regret, Nurse Joann helps both Brighton and Angel escape. The two begin a new chapter with nothing more than a few letters and addresses from their only remaining relatives.

Brighton follows the trail and finds her father, who is shocked to discover her alive – having believed the lie that she was dead. He seems to want to know her, but he is weary and living in poverty and unable to provide any practical support for them. Angel learns his true name – Luke – from his mother but quickly learns that she is unwilling to love or help him because of his appearance. Brighton and Angel struggle to make a life for themselves outside the asylum walls with no identity, no money and little knowledge of the world.

The pair quickly learn who they can and can't trust while coming across the Fancies and Fears travelling caravan of performers, who try and coerce Angel into being a part of the show. Despite vowing to remain together, Brighton and Angel get separated after the Fears and Fancies are thrown into chaos when Lazarus' daughter dies. Lazarus, the troupe's corrupt leader, has wicked plans to turn Brighton into a tattooed woman to display in the show.

As Brighton flees for her life, broken-hearted at leaving Angel behind, she arrives almost dead from dehydration and fatigue to a church. In her grief, she stumbles through the doors crying out the Lord's prayer and is rescued by the women of the church who nurse her back to health. After a few months of healing, she resumes her mission to get to her aunt, her only remaining relative, and begin her new life. Her aunt warmly embraces and welcomes her as she arrives at the door. To her surprise, Angel is there, having escaped the clutches of Lazarus and the fears and fancies.

1990

Nell has a lot of hidden secrets in her past, and Riverside Home is one of them. Upon receiving a package of old photographs from Kelly, a junior reporter, Nell's memories come flooding back – and they are not happy ones. Kelly is patiently persistent in pursuing the story and arranges to meet with Nell to return her pillowcase of undeveloped films from the asylum and give her an opportunity to have a say about the old Riverside Home being dull-dozed to the ground to make way for a new community centre. Revisiting the past is scary. Only Doc, her husband, knows of her past. But remembering the horrors of her secret past helps Nell heal and process what happened all those years ago. As she stands in front of her community giving a speech, she brings the atrocities covered up by the asylum staff into the light. Nell finally gets closure and a sense of peace – knowing she has fulfilled the promise she made to Grace all those years ago. As the story ends, Angel (Doc) and Nell embrace. After all the heartache, her Bright Unknown became more beautiful than she and Angel could have ever imagined.





DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & TALKING POINTS

1

Q. Which character from 'The Bright Unknown' did you relate to the most? Why?

TALKING POINTS

Some of the reasons we may feel connected to a particular character;

- 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 a particular character.

2

Q. What did you find most shocking about the Riverside Asylum?

TALKING POINTS

Answers may vary and could include;

- The inhumane treatment of the patients who were viewed as subhuman.
- The stigmatism, treatment, and diagnosis of mental health issues.
- The overall dreary and hopeless condition of the home itself.
- The lack of empathy and care from the hospital staff towards the patients.
- The conditions considered worthy of admittance – albinism, baby blues, interracial romance etc.

3

Q. How did Brighton and Angel's friendship help them survive both Riverside Home and their journey out into the 'real world'?

TALKING POINTS

"Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another: What!? You too? I thought I was the only one." – C. S. Lewis ;

- Angel and Brighton have both survived Riverside together; their shared experience bonds them through the trauma, pain and loss.
- Angel and Brighton have the same hopes and dreams; to belong, be loved, and be free.
- Angel and Brighton both cherish one another dearly and are fiercely loyal and protective over one another.
- Their personalities complement one another during times of trial; when one is weak, the other is strong, and vice versa.

4

Q. Home and Belonging are powerful themes in 'The Bright Unknown'. What kind of emotions do these words evoke in you?

TALKING POINTS

Home can be a place where we live, or a feeling of belonging, safety and acceptance. Homes are not always safe and comforting places – and if they are, we may still experience the sense that we don't belong.

Answers may vary and could include;

- I had a home that was warm, loving and safe while growing up.
- I moved around a lot as a child and didn't have a house to call home, but I had a family which made me feel like I belonged.
- My home was not a safe place or somewhere I felt accepted.
- I grew up without a home or anywhere to belong.

5

Q. In many ways, Nurse Joann is more of a mother to Brighton than her biological mother. Can you relate to this? Besides your biological mother, do you have a 'mother figure' in your life?

TALKING POINTS

Mother figures in our lives could include;

- Mentors, Spiritual mothers, or older women within the church.
- Women within our families such as aunts or grandmothers.
- Role models such as a women's leader at church.
- Friends

6

Q. Angel experiences rejection from his mother, which becomes a deep and painful burden to bear. Are you familiar with the feeling of rejection? How did you overcome this?

TALKING POINTS

Rejection can be devastating to experience and difficult to forgive. It may cause ongoing emotional pain, affect our self-esteem, lead to poor decision-making, and affect us physically (such as in cases like abandonment and/ or neglect).

- As Christians, we can find hope knowing that on the day when we come face to face with our Lord Jesus, we will be fully accepted and embraced. When we hold an eternal perspective, this moment of either being accepted or rejected by Christ is the only one of lasting significance. This doesn't mean rejection doesn't hurt now, but there will be a time when those rejections and the tears they caused are wiped away, and all wrongs are made right through Christ.
- It is okay to seek professional support to help us heal from rejection.
- Reading the Bible helps us determine what is true about ourselves. Others may reject or abandon us, but God never will. We have inherent value as His children despite how others treat us.
- Surrounding ourselves with great Christian friends, mentors and support, can allow us to lighten our load and share the burden in life-giving fellowship.

7

Q. Angel feels accepted by the 'Fears and Fancies'. It's comfortable to be surrounded by people like ourselves, but it's not always the best thing for us. Discuss.

TALKING POINTS

The people we surround ourselves with have influence over us. We need to ensure that we are being influenced mostly by those who are dedicated to sanctification and becoming more like Christ;

- Sometimes we find comfort in those who are like us because it normalises our bad habits, weaknesses or sin. This does not help us to grow and flourish as the Lord desires.
- If we are Christians who only associate with other Christians, how can we make disciples and evangelise?

8

Q. Despite her many failings, Nurse Joann lovingly sacrifices her dreams of a husband and family for Brighton. Has there been a time in your life when you've needed to sacrifice something you've deeply desired for another person?

TALKING POINTS

Answers may vary and could include;

- Motherhood; mothers often sacrifice much for their children, such as careers, aspirations or study.
- Care giving; sometimes our lives are suddenly interrupted as our elderly parents require care or a family member or friend falls ill.
- Our Faith; as we pick up our cross and die to ourselves, it's likely we will sacrifice many things we've enjoyed or held dear. This may include sin, toxic relationships or people, careers, money, dreams.

9

Q. On page 226, Angel says, "For the first time in our lives, we get to make choices for ourselves". Can you remember the first time you truly gained your independence and made a big decision for yourself?

TALKING POINTS

Answers may vary and could include;

- Choosing to follow Jesus.
- Choosing a career or education pathway.
- Choosing where to live/ to buy a home.
- Choosing a spouse.

10

Q. Is there a season or event from your past that you would rather forget? How can remembering often lead to healing?

TALKING POINTS

Remembering can lead to healing because;

- As we reflect on our past, we can gain perspective which we may not have had during the difficult season.
- We can seek support and prayer from others and may find comfort through those who have shared experiences.
- Time doesn't heal all emotional wounds, but it can often reduce the pain.
- When we remember, we realise we are stronger now than we were then.
- We can better understand triggers with time. When we are triggered or feel regression surfacing, we can seek support or coping strategies.
- As we renew our hearts and minds in God's truth, we remember our future hope and healing is in Christ. We can look back and see how our growth in the Lord has helped us heal.
- We can believe God when He says He will use our suffering for His glory and our good; our trust in Him grows as we mature in our faith and witness answered prayer, miracles, and the salvation of others.

When remembering just seems to hurt us, we can;

- Acknowledge that we may need to seek professional support and be okay with needing help.
 - Keep an accountability and prayer partner/ mentor to come alongside us and share our burdens.
 - Surround ourselves with life-giving Christian friendships; women who genuinely love us and will speak loving truth into our lives and pray for us.
 - Live righteously, so we do not give the devil a foothold to come in and drag up our past hurts in a way that causes us to sin (such as; unjustified anger, revenge, gossip or hate).
 - Begin the journey of forgiveness. This doesn't mean forgetting or saying what happened was okay, but it frees our souls from unforgiveness. Sometimes we need to forgive others, ourselves, or God for a challenging season, trauma or deep hurt.
- *A fantastic resource for tackling unforgiveness is 'The Bait of Satan' by John Bevere.

You may like to enter a time of prayer for healing. It may be helpful to take notes of prayer requests so you're able to uphold these specific prayers regularly and carry these burdens together as a group.



ADDITIONAL NOTES FOR LEADERS

The author provides discussion questions at the end of the book. You may like to encourage your book club sisters to keep a journal and answer these questions so you can discuss the book in further detail together.

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