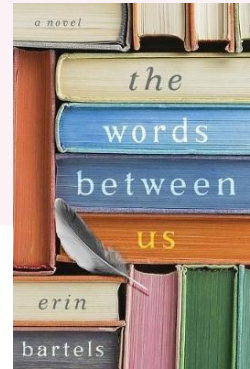




LEADER'S GUIDE

THE WORDS BETWEEN US BY ERIN BARTELS



"The only things I had ever created that had cost me some essential part of myself were the poems I'd written for Peter..."

ROBIN WINDSOR

THEMES

Belonging

Loneliness

Betrayal

Forgiveness

Trust

Presumptions

Death

HEADS UP! (TRIGGERS AND DELICATE TOPICS)

Language Warning

Death Penalty

Murder

Terrorism

CHARACTERS

Robin Windsor (Dickinson), an introverted book-lover whose friends live in the pages of the books she cherishes, opens her heart via poetry alone. At 15 years old, she experienced utter betrayal and abandonment from her parents when they were found guilty of heinous crimes and her father was given the death penalty. Despite falling in love with Peter, she struggles to let others get close to her. Robin has a habit of always assuming the worst of others. Through a series of misunderstandings, she lives in a place of bitterness and anger for most of her adult life.

Peter Flynt, an unlikely friend and book buddy to Robin, is in with the popular crowd at school and set to secure a football career. After the death of his mother – who dearly loved classic books – he forms a friendship with Robin based around a deal of swapping his mum's books for her poetry. Peter is an anchor, a trustworthy friend, and a loyal companion, hurt by the assumptions and misunderstandings surrounding Robin's exposed identity and her theories surrounding his mother's death.

Norman Windsor, Robin's father, is a disgraced senator and a convicted criminal awaiting lethal injection for multiple murders.

Sarah, (Robin's only friend in her adult life), lives a life of chaos and regret. Struggling with past mistakes and trauma, she often drowns her sadness with alcohol. A passionate artist, she channels her energy into producing art that helps her journey of healing. Despite her disordered life, she is a good friend to Robin.

Dawt Pi, Robin's shop assistant, is a quiet Asian girl with a language barrier who keeps to herself and doesn't pry into Robin's past. Although she doesn't talk much, she does openly admit to praying for Robin and is a positive influence in Robin's life.

BOOK SUMMARY

In 2001, Robin Windsor's father, Norman Windsor, is convicted of murder, extortion, obstruction of justice and conspiring with enemies and sentenced to lethal injection. Soon after, her mother is also sentenced to 20 years in prison for obstruction of justice. For her own protection, Robin is given a new name (Dickinson) and moves across the country to live with her grandmother. Living in a dingy trailer across from a cemetery, Robin meets Peter, a popular jock, at his mother's grave, and they become unlikely friends, connecting over books and poetry. They strike up a deal, her poetry for his mother's books. Over time, Robin and Peter fall in love, and Robin becomes intrigued with Peter's mother's books and the secrets they seem to give away. In an unfortunate series of events, a serious car accident leaves a Sussex high school student, a friend of Peter's dead, and another, Sarah, critically injured. At the same time, Robin's grandmother's trailer is broken in. Although nothing seems to be missing, her grandmother is found in a critical condition and taken to the hospital. Feeling utterly alone in the world, Robin and Peter road trip to visit her mother in prison, where her mother drops hints about her grandmother hiding something for her.

When Peter and Robin arrive home and find out her grandmother is dead, she becomes unstable and accuses Peter's dad of covering up his wife's suicide and lying to Peter about it. In her distress, she flees and, upon arriving home to the trailer, is confronted by a reporter who knows her real name. Furious, believing Peter has disclosed her secret, she searches for what her grandmother left and finds a hidden stash of money. She then sets off on her own and lives a mute and secluded life with ranger Dave (who she calls her surrogate grandfather) in the great lakes district wilderness.

18 years later, Robin is an introverted recluse living above her lonely, near-to-closing bookshop 'Brick & Mortar Books', with only Dawt Pi (her assistant), the professor (a parrot), and a reckless friend Sarah to keep her company. On the day of her father's execution, a book from an unknown sender appears, and immediately Robin suspects Peter has found her. As Robin has feared, her true identity is compromised, and a reporter enters the bookshop asking for some information on her father's case. As she turns on the news, she realises her father has been granted a stay of execution and will not be executed that day.

In an attempt to save her bookshop, Robin works together with Sarah and Ryan to build an art installation and win prize money. She slowly begins to form friendships out of her comfort zone but still finds her heart longing for Peter. After seeing Billy, one of her father's former colleagues who accuses her mother of the murders her father is on death row for, Robin decides to visit her father and finally hear his side of the story. It's then that the pieces begin to fall into place. Robin realises Billy is responsible for the murders and her grandmother's death. He was looking for a letter that proved his guilt and the money he used to trick Robin's mum into believing his stories.

As the book concludes, Robin and Peter reconnect after 18 years apart. Robin realises the error of her assumptions and the truth about his mother's death, leaving her book shop space to Sarah to open an art studio and start fresh – just as she and Peter are.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & TALKING POINTS

1

Q. Which part of *The Words Between Us* did you enjoy most? Why?

TALKING POINTS

- The dual timeline and suspense.
- The characters and their stories.
- The Literary references and/ or Robin's poetry.
- The romance between Robin and Peter.

2

Q. On page 59, Robin asks Peter if he has found himself in the books they're reading. Which character did you relate to most? Why?

TALKING POINTS

These are some reasons we may feel connected or drawn to a particular character;

- Empathy or sympathy for their circumstances.
- We may share similar character traits or personalities.
- We may share similar desires, hopes, or dreams.
- We may have made similar mistakes or poor decisions in our own lives.
- We may like or dislike particular characters because of our experiences with others.

3

Q. Robin, in her loneliness, says, "Books are filled with people" (p50). Who is your favourite 'book friend'?

TALKING POINTS

Books don't only take us on adventures across the globe or into magical worlds, but introduce us to characters who can become dear to us. 'Book friends' are characters that leave a lasting impression on us and teach us how to be brave, strong, kind or faithful. They may give us hope or have painful circumstances that seem to connect us.

A favourite 'book friend' or character may be;

- A character from a cherished childhood story.
- A character from a book you read who had similar circumstances or personality to yourself.
- A character who taught you something you will never forget.

4

Q. Robin believes she's a disappointment to God (p52). Can you relate to how she feels?

TALKING POINTS

Striving for perfection in our strength and believing we've got to earn God's love and acceptance can cause us to think we're a disappointment to God. When we sin, instead of running toward God to repent and seek His forgiveness, we run away from Him; believing if we work harder, be better, or help others more, we can somehow earn a place in His heart and Kingdom.

In her book, 'You're Not Enough (and that's okay)', Allie Beth Stuckey reminds us that God is not asking for us to be enough; He is enough for us. How does knowing that we aren't 'enough' release us from the pressure of striving for perfection?

- In exchange for the confusion and exhaustion that comes with trying to be enough, He gives us peace and relief. In exchange for superficial confidence, Jesus offers us steadfast assurance and trust in his faithfulness.
- Christ meets us where we are, but He does not leave us there; instead, He heals and sanctifies us through His Holy Spirit.
- "When we give Jesus our 'not enough', He blesses it, breaks it, and feeds His people. We can bring what little we have and trust the Lord to use it" – Sheila Walsh.
- If we read the Bible regularly, we can continue to speak biblical truth into our lives and protect our hearts from the enemy's deception.

5

Q. Robin is concerned with what others think about her. She tells herself not to care, but she does. How can this unhealthy habit be broken?

TALKING POINTS

Many of us struggle with unhealthy habits such as people-pleasing and needing acceptance and praise from others to feel validated. We want to be free from caring about others' opinions, but we can really struggle when the thoughts come from people we care about and look up to.

A few things to remember;

- First and foremost, as Christians, our identity is 'Child of God' 1 John 5:1
- The world is not our home, heaven is our home, and we do not want to get too comfortable here. As Christians, it is likely that we may never experience the belonging we desire among non-Christian friends and family.
- We must seek our validation from God alone.
- Aim for a 'Well done, good and faithful servant' from our Father in Heaven instead of worldly success or accolades which fade here on earth.
- Read the word of God to remind ourselves that we are; loved (John 3:16), holy and blameless (Ephesians 1:4), chosen (1 Peter 2:9), God's workmanship (Ephesians 2:10), forgiven (Ephesians 1:7), not ruled by fear (2 Timothy 1:7), strong (Colossians 1:11), are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14) and never alone (Deuteronomy 31:6).

6

Q. Robin is quick to assume the worst of Peter when her identity is discovered. This leads to 18 years of bitterness and separation. How might this have been avoided?

TALKING POINTS

Some of the reasons we can be quick to judge others are;

- We believe we would make "better" decisions than they have.
- We believe the worst about them or believe their intentions were wicked.
- We believe their behaviour is sinful and deserves judgement.
- We have been hurt or offended by another's decisions.

There are many more reasons why we are quick to judge, yet the Bible tells us we must;

- Judge not or we will be judged (Matthew 7:1).

- Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God through Christ has forgiven us (Ephesians 4:32).
- Not gossip because it is sinful (2 Corinthians 12:20).
- Forgive one another so that we will be forgiven (Luke 6:37).
- Quick to hear and slow to speak (James 1:19).
- Speak evil of no one, avoid quarrelling, and be courteous to all people (Titus 3:2).

The consequences of harsh and/or quick judgments are often;

- Misunderstanding, miscommunication and misinterpretation of the situation (as in Robin's case).

Before we make assumptions, we should remember it's important to;

- Try and understand both sides of the story and not project what we would have done into the situation.
- Offer grace and support to those who we believe have made poor decisions.
- Acknowledge we are all only human and make mistakes and that we all have limitations.
- Always assume the best of people.

7

Q. Robin spends nine years of her life wandering in the wilderness, mute, with Dave, her surrogate grandfather. During this time, she begins to heal, learns about the local flora and fauna, and slows down enough to enjoy life again. Are you (or have you been) in a wilderness season? How did God use this season?

TALKING POINTS

Traditionally, Christians have often avoided 'wilderness' seasons because they may feel unfruitful, confusing, remind us of our lack of control over things and cause us to feel helpless or impatient;

God can (and does) use our wilderness seasons to conform us into the image of Christ;

- We are often pruned and purged of sin, toxic relationships or habits, false beliefs and can mentally or emotionally reset.
- We can slow down enough to recover from burnout and care for/ manage health conditions.
- Be prepared for something new; a job, a ministry, a spouse or a child.
- Visible fruit takes time to grow. Seeds are often planted and begin to grow during the wilderness seasons, and the fruit becomes visible as we trust, obey and surrender to God's will for our lives.

8

Q. Robin realises that she has been too consumed with her trauma and grief to pay attention or take time to meet others in theirs (p319). How can we become more alert to the needs of others, even while suffering or enduring our own hardship?

TALKING POINTS

"Our relationships give us an opportunity to show God's love to others. In our narcissistic world and self-absorbed culture, other-centred behaviour stands out. Way out." (Listen, Love, Repeat by Karen Ehman p45).

Some points to think about;

- "Friendship is born at the moment when a person says to another; what! You too? I thought I was the only one" C. S Lewis.
- "Me too" lets someone know they are not alone and that we empathise with their pain and circumstances.

- Kindness to others during suffering may look like; active listening, home-cooked meals, childcare, sharing stories of similar sufferings, cards of sympathy at sad anniversaries, flowers, and heartfelt gifts.

What might it look like to mourn with someone?

- We can expect hardship, suffering and sorrows, but we are also called to journey together through these trials.
- Seeing someone weep can be uncomfortable, but we are not representing Christ if we ignore their pain.
- We cannot fix anyone's problems, and we cannot be Christ to anyone.
- What a hurting person needs most is the presence of someone who loves and cares for them.
- Listening can be more productive than talking.
- Speaking gospel truth when the timing is right is crucial.
- Prayer is powerful and effective.
- We can share our lessons learnt during trials where appropriate.

9

Q. Betrayal and forgiveness are themes in *The Words Between Us*. Discuss Robin's journey of forgiving her parents. Why can it be so challenging to forgive someone who has betrayed us?

TALKING POINTS

It can be easy to forgive someone who has unknowingly offended us or has accidentally sinned against us. But it can feel like an impossible task to forgive someone who has betrayed us, especially those we love and trust the most. The good news is that what is impossible with man is possible with God.

What is true biblical forgiveness?

- Forgiveness is not accepting sin, but cancelling the debt owed by the individual who has sinned against us. This protects our hearts from resentment and bitterness and is expected of us by God, who has forgiven our great debts (Matthew 6:14).
- Offering forgiveness does not mean we must put ourselves at risk and re-enter dangerous or toxic relationships with others.

10

Q. Why are some books memorable, powerful, and life-changing, while others are not?

TALKING POINTS

On page 316, Robin speaks about the difference between books by classifying them as either living or dead;

- All books take effort, but living books have cost the author something; some essential part of themselves and their hearts dwell on the pages.
- Living books teach us something about the world and ourselves. They are rich in language and have well-developed characters who feel alive.
- Passionate authors and master storytellers write living books.
- Living books expand our imagination, interests and knowledge – encouraging us to learn more.



Disclaimer: Thanks for supporting this essential ministry impacting the lives of women the world over! We pray that our Heavenly Father blesses both you and the women you lead. This Leader's Guide has been prepared by Blossoming through Books and is protected by copyright law. Please seek express permission from Blossoming through Books before making copies by contacting blossomingthroughbooks@gmail.com. Please share your experience and feedback with us!