



# LEADER'S GUIDE

## THE GIRL WHO COULD BREATHE UNDER WATER BY ERIN BARTELS



*"The best fiction simply tells the truth. But the truth is never that simple."*

**ERIN BARTELS**

### THEMES

Friendship

Family

Secrets

Forgiveness

Love

Healing

Hope

### HEADS UP! (TRIGGERS AND DELICATE TOPICS)

Sexual Abuse

Suicide and Death

Substance Abuse

### CHARACTERS

*Kendra* is the main character. She wrote her break-out novel as a method of recovery from childhood trauma that haunted her still in adulthood. At first, she believed she had exorcised the pain and found an opening to forgiving the one she holds responsible. Still, after receiving a cryptic note saying that she did not know or understand the whole story, she begins to realise the pain is still there. She begins to realise that even villains should have their chance to speak. Kendra sets out to see if she can identify the writer of the note and just maybe repair a long-broken friendship.

*Cami* is Kendra's girlhood friend from her summers at Hidden Lake. Cami was adopted as a young girl from Korea by Robert and Beth, neighbours of Kendra's Grandfather on Hidden Lake. Kendra describes her as 'gorgeous and gregarious, daring and dangerous, haughty and hilarious and someone who lived life to the fullest. Cami is feisty, full of fire and speaks her mind. During their childhood, she looked out for Kendra always, except when it truly mattered.

*Tyler* is Cami's adopted brother, both a victim and villain. He was an orphaned boy in Korea, abused at a young age. As Tyler was never given the proper guidance to heal from his traumatic experiences, he was robbed of the opportunity to learn from them, creating a negative cycle of abuse in his life. He is both charming and attractive. Tyler takes advantage of the innocence of a younger Kendra and becomes the abuser by forcing her into a sexual relationship she was not prepared for.

*Robert* is the adoptive father to Cami and Tyler and, incidentally, the biological father to Kendra due to indiscretions made in his youth. He is both the good guy and bad guy in Kendra's story – a devoted mentor and absent father. He is an accomplished author who encourages and guides Kendra in her writing from a young age.

*Andreas* is a German translator and one of the few honest and true characters in the story. He brings an element of calm, reasonableness and trustworthiness to a story filled with characters with secrets and dubious motives. His kindness and compassion anchor Kendra as she faces her past demons and reconciles with her guilt in abandoning Cami and her mixed memories of childhood abuse.

*Ike* is a WW2 veteran and a most unusual character in the story. He is a gruff recluse who observes many things on the Lake. His memory of events and kindness are shown when it is most needed.

## STORYLINE

Kendra is an author who received great success with her debut novel, but the deadline for her second book is fast approaching, and she has not written a word. Writer's block hits after she finds a hurtful anonymous note from a 'very disappointed reader'.

In her last-ditch effort to reclaim her voice and finish her second novel, Kendra returns to her Grandfather's cabin at Hidden Lake, where she spent her childhood days basking in the sun and frolicking with friends. But it is also the place where she endured great pain and the loss of her innocence.

There, she is faced with the ghost of memories past and the discovery that her childhood friend, Cami, has disappeared. She finds the courage to confront her abuser, Tyler, which isn't easy. However, facing the consequences of her broken friendship with Cami is the hardest thing she has had to do.

Kendra's past holds pain, secrets, and many missed opportunities, but as she reflects on these, she grows in strength, learning to forgive those who have hurt her and herself for the hurt she caused others. With a bit of help from a stranger, Kendra finds that she is still capable of love and being loved.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & TALKING POINTS

1

Q. Which character did you feel was most relatable? Why?

### TALKING POINTS

We may connect to a character for the following reasons:

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

## 2

Q. Can you think of a childhood friend or place that profoundly impacted your life and who you are?

### TALKING POINTS

Answers may vary and could include the following:

- People: Family, Childhood friends, Pastor or Church mentor, Godparent, Neighbor.
- Places: Home, School, Work

## 3

Q. Kendra states that Robert was the good and bad guy in her story. There is good and bad in us all. How can we rest in God when we fail or fall short of who we want to be?

### TALKING POINTS

God is not asking us for perfection. His perfection is enough to cover our failures, and what He desires most is our heart:

- God gives us peace and relief in exchange for the striving and exhaustion that comes with trying to be good enough.
- Christ meets us where we are, but He does not leave us there; He heals and sanctifies us through His Holy Spirit. The closer we become to Christ, the more like Him we become.
- "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

## 4

Q. A main theme in this story is forgiveness. Why is forgiving important, and what helps you find the strength to forgive?

### 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).
- Forgiveness is not an emotion but a daily decision with the Lord's strength.
- Often forgiveness results in the restoration of the relationship, but not always.
- Choosing forgiveness does not mean we must put ourselves at risk and re-enter dangerous or toxic relationships with others. We can forgive someone and not re-enter relationships with them until trust is developed or repentance has occurred.

## 5

Q. What makes us who we are today? The good days we've had or the bad ones?

### TALKING POINTS

It's easy to be joyful when everything is going well. But trials and suffering reveal who we truly are and what's hidden in our hearts. There are a few things we can remember while enduring suffering and trials;

- God's supernatural peace and joy soothes our heavy hearts during grief.

- Praying scripture can help us experience peace and draw nearer to the Lord.
- We may be blessed through help and support from others (Christian love and community are often demonstrated when a church family is suffering hardship).
- We must first think of God's perfect love for us, then consider our circumstances so we do not begin to question His perfect love.
- God is worthy to be praised in all circumstances, not for all circumstances, but in them.
- Trials and suffering can strengthen our character and confident hope of salvation (Romans 5: 3-5).
- Our suffering may encourage others, shine Christ's light, and role model the Christian faith and endurance to others.
- On the other side of our suffering, we may have some perspective and understanding we did not have during the suffering.
- When we get to heaven, we will find the things we did and the lessons we learned along the road we walked were unmistakably the best path for us.
- What has happened to us may have helped advance the gospel and save one (or many) for Christ.
- Our pain and trials in life can indeed bless and help others overcome their suffering through shared experience, advice, and comfort.
- We can offer to mentor another going through a trial we have walked through ourselves.
- God works all things together for the good of those who love Him.

## 6

Q. "The best fiction simply tells the truth, but the truth is never simple" (Robert). Why do you think the truth is never simple?

### TALKING POINTS

It can be challenging to know what is truth and what's a lie – especially when emotions are involved and imperfect people.

We can't always trust our feelings, but we can trust the Word of God;

- We may feel abandoned or let down by God, but the Bible says, "He will never leave us or forsake us" – 1 Kings 8:57.
- We may feel like our suffering is pointless and hopeless, but God promises to use it for our sanctification (our good) and His glory – Romans 5:3-8.
- We may feel like our sin is unforgivable, but God promises to forgive those who are safe in Jesus – 1 John 1:9.

How does knowing God's truth help us in our daily struggles?

- When we believe that the Lord loves us, that He will never leave us, that He will use our suffering ultimately for good, and that He will forgive us - our trust and faithfulness in Him grow.
- More trust and faithfulness will result in more obedience.
- We are unlikely to be fully obedient to God if we are secretly questioning in our hearts whether God is actually good, whether He really loves us, and if He really wants what's best for us.

## 7

Q. Friendship is a theme in the novel. Discuss Kendra's and Cami's friendship. How can we learn to be better friends to one another?

### TALKING POINTS

Jen Wilkin, in the introduction of Christina Fox's book, 'Closer Than A Sister', shares some friendship wisdom:

- We should seek the right friendships; seeking life-giving friendships is intentional.
- We should steward our friendships well; as good stewards of our gifts, we lavishly pour into our friends' lives, seeking to be more others-focused and entering relationships wanting to bless others. Ultimately, we should be thinking more about our friend's needs and less about what we can get out of the friendship.
- We use the wisdom God has given us; God generously pours wisdom into our lives when we ask for it. We need His wisdom to enter into the right relationships and maintain those relationships as we grow and learn together.
- We need grace; imperfect women require grace to cover one another's faults, forgive one another, and flourish together.

8

Q. The book touches on the idea that we are responsible for the mental health of others, and Kendra feels partly responsible for Cami's suicide. What are your thoughts on this? How does God ask us to care for others?

### TALKING POINTS

The Bible says that we should:

- Love one another as Christ has loved us (John 13:34).
- Rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12.15).
- Comfort one another as God has comforted us (*paraphrase* 2 Corinthians 1:4).

Caring for one another is a requirement of every Christian. However, we cannot be Christ for a person. Ultimately we can love, support, help and seek intervention for those in need, but we cannot force anyone to do anything because of our God-given free will. We may feel responsible if we've seen a need and haven't met it or if we were convicted of helping and did not. These feelings are an opportunity to repent and ask God to help us love others better next time, but sometimes terrible things happen beyond our control, even when we've done everything we can to help. In these circumstances, we can seek comfort from God.

9

Q. During her healing journey, Kendra is filled with regret for not returning to Hidden Lake sooner. Can you think of a time you felt deep regret? How can remembering help us to heal?

### TALKING POINTS

Remembering can lead to healing because;

- As we reflect on our past, we can gain perspectives that 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.

10

Q. The book explores the idea of the validity of the truth in our memories and differing perspectives. Why is it important to consider the same story from different points of view?

### TALKING POINTS

It's easy to assume the worst behind someone's motives and actions while we are hurt or offended. The consequences are often:

- Misunderstanding
- Miscommunication
- Misinterpretation of the situation

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

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



-----  
**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](mailto:blossomingthroughbooks@gmail.com). Please share your experience and feedback with us!