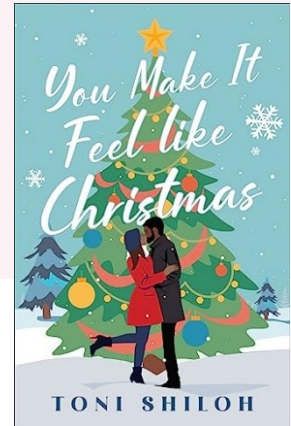




LEADER'S GUIDE

YOU MAKE IT FEEL LIKE CHRISTMAS BY TONI SHILOH



"You're the reason this season actually feels like Christmas."

STARR LEWIS

THEMES

Grief and Loss

Family

Faith

Discernment

Forgiveness

Love and Hope

Loneliness

CHARACTERS

Starr Lewis is a faithful and intelligent young woman, struggling with an intense fear of rejection from her family. Always feeling like an outsider, Starr has struggled to maintain her relationships with her family for the past few years while she's been in New York. All of this changes when Starr returns home for Christmas and the wedding of her sister. Starr decides in her heart that it is time to forgive and redeem her family relationships. She is guided heavily by her conversational prayer with God and desires to live a life for Jesus.

Waylon Emmerson is a God-honouring young man, suffering from loneliness and grief after his mother's recent death. Despite his big dreams of working with disadvantaged youth, Waylon finds himself working in his mother's Christmas store – not out of passion, but an obligation – as he tries to keep his mother's legacy alive. Waylon wants to discover his true God-given purpose but doesn't know whether it's running the Christmas store, or selling the shop and moving forward with a not-for-profit adventure.

Noel and Gabe Lewis, are Starr's brothers. Both are very competitive and work for Mr Lewis at the bank. They care deeply for their sisters, and adore Starr, even though she doesn't realise it.

Angel and Eve Lewis are Starr's sisters. While Angel is bossy, selfish and incredibly oblivious to anyone or anything outside her own world, Eve is a quiet observer and peacemaker.

Mr and Mrs Lewis are Starr's parents. While Starr's father is a workaholic, and responsible for his children's striving, perfectionism and fear of failure, Mrs Lewis is a kind and doting mother, who encourages her children and balances out her husband well.

Ashton is Starr's ex-boyfriend and Angel's fiancé. He is sleazy and motivated by personal gain.

STORYLINE

After being laid off from her prestigious New York City job, Starr Lewis returns home to DC for Christmas believing she is a failure. Never quite feeling like she fits in with her own family of perfect overachievers, Starr is dreading the holiday season. But it's not just the holidays and her newly unemployed status that has her anxious, it's also the upcoming Christmas Eve wedding of her selfish and bossy sister Angel... to her ex-boyfriend!

As Starr grapples internally with the challenges of the upcoming wedding – and the many excruciating expectations placed on her – she finds both comfort and joy in her fast friend Waylon. Waylon is a childhood friend of the Lewis family and has been invited to participate in the family's Christmas activities after the recent death of his mother, and his sister - the only family he has left - currently living overseas in Japan.

Starr and Waylon are instantly attracted to one another, but with Waylon tied down to his late mother's Christmas store in DC and Starr seeking a new NY job, they'll need discernment, coffee and prayer, to get them through this hectic Christmas season and to make plans for what comes next.

This is a touching and relatable Christmas novella, reminding us that things are not always as we perceive them to be. If we choose to live more alert to others at Christmastime, we can put aside past hurts, unforgiveness and competitiveness, and live within the moment, embracing the true Christmas spirit. The fruit of these intentional - and often hard decisions – is that we can enjoy restored relationships, or at the very least, live lives free from bitterness and resentment.

These important themes and messages are mixed in amongst the sweetest PG romance, full of delightfully cheesy one-liners and swoon-worthy Christmas kisses.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & TALKING POINTS

1

Q. Who was your favourite character from *You Make It Feel Like Christmas*? Why?

TALKING POINTS

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

- We may feel 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.

2

Q. For many people, Christmas time can be a lonely or stressful time of year. How can we prioritise our faith, family and living generously? How did Mrs Lewis ensure Waylon wasn't lonely throughout the holidays?

TALKING POINTS

Mrs Lewis is living alert to the needs of others. She intentionally makes space for Waylon to join in the Lewis family's Christmas activities. It's as simple as acknowledging that often we can make space for others at our table during Christmas.

If Christmas is a time of loss, grief and loneliness, how can we redirect our hearts and gaze to something more?

These notes from *Treasuring God in our Traditions* by Noel Piper are helpful. While preparing our hearts for special occasions, we can consider the following (p87) ;

- Am I my Father's child? Do I resemble Him in my generosity?
- Am I focusing on God's gift of His son so my appreciation for Him grows?
- Am I celebrating Christ?

Too often, we can become consumed with everything we're required to do during Christmas. How can we make time for what's most important? Traditions can help us re-focus our busy hearts as we slow with our loved ones to take part;

Noel suggests some of these Christmas Traditions;

- Advent activities (these begin four Sundays before Christmas Day) such as candles, calendars, and books.
- Manger scene (either as toys for children or ornaments).
- Symbols that represent the life of Jesus, history, and prophecy.
- Christmas dress-up box (for children).
- Jesse Tree & Decorations.
- Scripture or a daily Christmas story over breakfast or dinner with the whole family for December.

3

Q. Starr dreads returning home to DC unemployed and feels like a failure. What do you think was the turning point in Starr's story that gave her confidence and hope for her future?

TALKING POINTS

Starr comes from a family of overachievers, and her father often expects perfection from her. When Starr begins to realise that it's not her earthly father she ought to be pleasing – but her Heavenly Father – she begins to find freedom in this area of her life. No longer experiencing a “fear of man”, she chooses to have a holy fear* and reverence for pleasing God instead.

When Starr decides to decline the NY job offer, she begins to accept her Heavenly Father's will for her life.

*Having a holy fear of God is not being terrified of Him or believing He is angry and avoiding Him, but instead, having a humble appreciation of who He is in comparison to who we are. God is Holy and deserving of our worship and praise.

4

Q. Waylon is grieving the loss of his mother and feels obligated to keep her memory alive through the Christmas Shop. How does Waylon eventually come to realise that Everly's Evergreen Dreams is his new dream?

TALKING POINTS

Waylon is torn between wanting his dream for his life (running a not-for-profit for disadvantaged kids) and his mother's dream for his life (running the Christmas shop). Ultimately though, Waylon is concerned with God's will for his life, as well as his bigger-picture dream to start a family. Starr beautifully interrupts his life, and as she begins helping him with the Christmas shop, he is filled with joy and peace as he serves his community through the store. Waylon is a people person, and a powerful moment of clarity for him is when he is serving Mrs Blackwell and helps her with the Christmas stocking. Mr Blackwell, who then offers to buy the Christmas shop, helps Waylon to realise that Everly's Evergreen Dreams is his new dream; not out of obligation, but joy and peace, and a hope to pass it along to his future children.

5

Q. Throughout the story, we're privy to the private prayers of the characters. How did Starr and Waylon rely on prayer? Could you relate to their conversational style of prayer?

TALKING POINTS

Both Starr and Waylon often pray to God for strength and patience in difficult situations, for discernment when making decisions, and for healing and restoration for broken relationships - humbly and conversationally - the same way we might seek advice from a beloved friend or mentor.

There may be a variety of ways the women in your group pray. You may like to discuss the benefits of different types of prayer:

- Conversational prayer: Continued interaction with God, seeking His presence and Holy Spirit in all circumstances.
- Other more formal prayer times or prayer with family/friends (kneeling, bedtime, grace at the table etc.): slightly more habitual and can create healthy routines and daily rhythms. Also great for training children and connecting with our spouses.
- Corporate prayer: prayer with our church family is often a great opportunity to pray for the world and people outside of our spheres.

6

Q. What was your favourite part of Starr and Waylon's romance?

TALKING POINTS

Starr and Waylon's romance begins with a sweet reunion of their past childhood friendship. As it blossoms, some memorable or favourite moments might be:

- The delightful cheesy and cute one-liners.
- The memory of Waylon teaching Starr to ride her bike.
- Waylon's faithful presence while Starr had to face many challenging circumstances with Angel.

7

Q. Starr and Angel's relationship has suffered from betrayal, hurt and unforgiveness. How does Starr journey through her grief and learn to forgive her sister?

TALKING POINTS

While Starr doesn't always *feel* like forgiving her sister, she knows in her heart that she *wants* to. Starr eventually accepts that forgiveness is between her and God, and that to love Angel well, she needs to let God handle Angel and help her heart be free of bitterness and anger.

In this broken and hurting world, people will betray and hurt us. Tragically they may not choose to repent, say sorry, or try to restore the brokenness. We can only be responsible for our hearts and decisions.

In Karen Ehman's book, *Listen, Love, Repeat*, we find a list of ways and encouragements of how we can love difficult-to-love people:

It is counter-cultural to love the unlovable, but it is God's plan for us (p177-187);

- The only way to love a difficult person is to expect nothing in return.
- We must recognise that we are not perfect and easily lovable ourselves.
- When we operate from a heart posture of humility, it is easier to love those who are difficult.
- We must begin the journey with prayer, especially for their hearts and our approach to them.
- Be cautious entering the relationship, do not move too fast or come on too strong in your attempt to show the love of Jesus.
- Be curious; ask them about themselves and practise active listening.
- Serve them where possible (with your time and resources).
- Love out of obedience to God and leave the results to Him.
- Keep in mind the difference between the *weak* (those who are difficult because of tragic circumstances – trauma, abuse, mental health) and those who are *wicked* (deliberately unkind or pursuing evil). Carefully consider which group this person belongs to and ensure you do not put yourself in a dangerous situation (see pages 184 – 187 for more in-depth information).

8

Q. Starr realises that she's been so caught up in her own drama, that she neglected to consider that those around her are also struggling. How can we live more alert to others, even while we're struggling ourselves?

TALKING POINTS

Sometimes our suffering seems too much to bear, and we may become heartbroken or begin to distrust the Lord. God intends to grow us during suffering and for us to seek our peace, joy and hope from Him, ultimately maturing our faith. This is a challenging process and is only made possible through the faithfulness of Christ, who promises to finish His good work in us.

Some truths we can remember to give us hope are;

- God PROMISES never to leave us or fail us (Hebrews 13:5); despite our feelings, we can declare with confidence, "The Lord is my helper, so I will have no fear." (Hebrews 13:6).
- Trials and suffering join us in Christ's suffering; trials develop endurance, endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation (Romans 5:4).
- Trials refine us, reveal the areas of our hearts that need attention, and help us become more like Christ.

Once we know and understand these truths about God in our heart, we can reach out to others and love them well—even while we're suffering. It won't always be possible (and sometimes we'll be the ones who need to be taken care of), but throughout life's normal stresses and ups and downs, we can still have a heart to joyfully serve and live alert to the needs of our friends and family.

9

Q. Starr dreams of becoming a published author, but out of fear and rejection, plays it safe and gets a job her earthly father would approve of. Have you ever had a dream that you've neglected from fear of failure?

TALKING POINTS

Many of us have dreams hidden in our hearts. There are many reasons we don't pursue them:

- It's a "One Day" dream; we feel like it could happen *one day... but not this day*.
- We might feel ill-equipped to achieve our dreams, so it's easier not to try than to try and fail.
- We may be unsure if the dream is from God and therefore reluctant to try.

10

Q. What is one new Christmas tradition you could add to your Christmas calendar that would bless others?

TALKING POINTS

There are many ways we can bless others at Christmastime. Here are a few things we could do that are not too difficult and could transform someone's Christmas;

- Host a Christmas lunch or dinner for church friends or community members who might be lonely, widowed, elderly, single, and/or isolated from family.
- Give homemade Christmas gifts; cookies, Christmas tree ornaments, cards, and knitted things.
- Drop a meal box to a family in need.
- Offer to help with child care for a day, particularly for single parents or parents with little children who may feel tired.
- Arrange to go carolling to bless your neighbours.

"If there's room in your heart, you'll make room in your home" – Karen Ehman, *Listen, Love, Repeat* (p136).

In *Listen, Love, Repeat* Karen suggests that our homes can become our primary ministry base and be used to help build the kingdom. Here are some things we can remember and draw encouragement from as we open our homes or seek to be generous to others;

- Who truly owns our stuff? (God).
- We should be willing to be good stewards of our stuff; this includes sharing what we have with others.
- When we stop stressing about our homes being perfect, we can focus on blessing others and sharing Jesus. Most genuine people do not care whether our homes are perfect or up to display home standards.
- It's OK to present a house which is well-loved and lived in – clean and somewhat tidy is enough.
- If you can't open your home, you may consider hospitality or organising fellowship for those in need in a different capacity. For example, a regular catch-up at the local coffee shop or perhaps some baked goods – or even purchased snacks – dropped at someone's door with an encouraging card.



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