



Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. What are some of the ways in which Chris and we question—as a result of her misperception of her and Taylor’s relationship—her competence as a therapist and lover?
2. What different views of female sexuality emerge from the relationships and actions of Chris, Renny, Taylor, Leigh, and Stéphane Michaud?
3. Does Chris’s challenge ultimately become one of recreating her very identity, beyond merely reconstructing her life without Taylor? What is the relationship between identity and love, desire, and self-deception? To what extent do we create our own identities or have them imposed upon us by society?
4. How central to Chris’s life is her need for control? Does she come to realize that loss of control is a defining element in her disintegration? How is the need for control related to a person’s self-esteem?
5. In what ways do Chris’s neglect and manipulation by her parents, in her early years, contribute to the vulnerability that surfaces following Taylor’s disappearance?
6. There are numerous references to gambling throughout the book, from Chris’s card-sharp father, to the Magic 8 Ball, to Chris’s own prowess with cards. What is the significance of all these references?
7. How much to the point is Myra’s comment (remembered by Chris) that “covering a lot of territory means you’re never wholly vulnerable in any one place”? In what ways does our gradually acquired knowledge of Chris’s sexual history contribute to our understanding of her character and her inability to achieve true intimacy?
8. Chris’s best friend and closest confidant, Daniel, is a fellow therapist and a heterosexual man with troubles of his own. How does his role differ from that of Leigh?
9. How do the ten flashbacks, juxtaposed with the ongoing narrative of Chris’s present, contribute to our understanding of Chris’s attraction to Taylor and of Chris’s changing comprehension of their relationship? To what extent do these flashbacks foreshadow for us, if not for Chris, the outcome of that relationship?

10. In the first flashback, we learn that “in the face of everything Chris knows to be true about the fundamental isolation of humans, their imperviousness to real connection, or the failure of connection to alleviate the isolation, . . . she longs to . . . slip back to the place before unbelieving.” What does this tell us about Chris’s inability to confront her own emotions and behavior? How does a terror of being “stunningly, utterly alone” impact Chris’s personal relationships?
11. What are the two most important physical clues Chris discovers that enable her to better understand Taylor’s disappearance? How is it ironic that she finds both clues in Taylor’s darkroom?
12. At the novel’s midpoint Chris arrives in Morocco and confronts Stéphane Michaud in the desert. What is the correspondence between the desert, where the paved road gives way to unmarked sandy tracks, and Chris’s inner state? What revelations does she have during her drive, in the Berber market, and in her confrontation with Mme. Michaud?
13. Stéphane Michaud tells Chris that “for Taylor, aging was like a death. The powers she holds are youth and beauty.” How does Chris react to this? To what extent does this explain Taylor’s disappearance?
14. Chris and we are presented with growing evidence that the Taylor she loved was, to a great extent, a figure of her own imagining. And after her visit to the psychic, Chris realizes that “who she is missing and who she might find are quite different people.” How does each of us, like Chris, create the person we love out of our own needs, hopes, desires, and ideals?
15. Chris’s words near the end of the novel, directed to Daniel, are: “The ferocious solitude and isolation of it all. Souls sealed away in separate bubbles.” To what extent does this constitute Chris’s final judgment of her own and everyone else’s situation in life? What does it reveal about Chris’s newly acquired sense of self?