

Questions for discussion

In the Prologue, the narrator tells the reader this is a "love story." What kind of love story is it?

Did you see any of the characters undergo a transformation during the course of the narrative? What provoked the change?

How does the narrator's faith change throughout the book? Is it stronger or weaker by the end?

Images of water--rain, tears, floods--appear throughout. How does this imagery relate to the story as a whole?

Most of the book takes place in New Orleans, with two chapters in Madison, CT. What do these two places represent, and what is the significance of physical place in the story?

Is there an answer to the narrator's question for God about *why* Penny gets cancer?

The story occurs over the course of one year, and it is marked by the seasons of the liturgical church calendar. What role does formal religion play in this story? Does it help or hinder spiritual growth?

Hope is a theme that runs throughout the book. On page 84, the narrator writes, "So hope meant believing in a promise, in a future that didn't contain the wrenching reality of pain, and death, and separation. And yet hope involved more than the future, was more complicated than a denial of the hurt and confusion of the present moment, more complicated than trite condolences about death bringing us to a better place. Somehow, I thought, hope had to connect the present and the future, bind them together." Do you agree? What is the difference between hope and optimism? Is this a hopeful story?