

## The Things Between Us Reading Group Guide

### Introduction

When Lee Montgomery's father is diagnosed with aggressive stomach cancer, she returns from Oregon to her childhood home outside of Boston, Four Corner Farm. Montgomery has come back to help her parents navigate the specialists, hospitals, treatment options, home care, and pain management, but she also finds herself managing her parents' special breed of anguish. Her parents are New England WASPs of the old school--that dying American subculture that effortlessly combines repression, flamboyant idiosyncrasy, and alcoholism, with sometimes disturbing and often entertaining results. Death, it seems, is the one thing that might crack their formidable stoicism. As her mother demands her first drink of the day at 8:45 am and refuses to accompany her husband to the doctor, Montgomery's father wavers between his familiar impassivity, his newfound fear, and a willful ignorance of his dire situation. With the help of her older siblings, who assemble at Four Corner Farm for the first time in 20 years, Montgomery struggles to cope with conflicting feelings about her parents and the scope of their lives as individuals, as a couple, and as heads of her fragmented yet fiercely loyal family.

### Discussion Points

1. Considering that this book focuses primarily on her relationship with her father, why does the author begin with: "First things first. You have to meet my mother." What does this first scene tell you about "Mumzy" and the Montgomerys' relationship? How does their behavior throughout the book reinforce your early impressions of them? Does either of them ever change? Does the way that Lee relates to them ever change?
2. Lee spent most of her childhood trying to cope with her mother and adoring her father. Why do you think Lee identifies so strongly with Big Dad? In what ways are they alike? How are they different?
3. Despite hints of a deep resentment and long-held anger, Lee still seems to love her mother very much. What is it about Barbara that Lee admires? Knowing some of the facts of her life, can you sympathize with Barbara at all?
4. Compare and contrast the author's childhood in New England with her adulthood in Southern California and Oregon. In what ways do the two regions offer similar experiences? In what ways are they different?
5. On page 7, Lee calls her father a "classic Yankee." Using examples from the book, explain what she means by this.
6. Lee and her father "spend [their] lives together doing chores," (p. 14-15). Even after she moves away, they complete projects together over the phone. What is the symbolism inherent in this characterization? What does it tell you about their respective roles in the family?
7. The author describes her mother's family, the Begoles, as a family that "loses things." What has Barbara Begole Montgomery lost? Do you think Lee is a part of that legacy? If so, what has she lost? What is she trying to find?

8. On page 48, Lee describes her family as planets in the solar system. Why does she make each of her associations between family members and their respective orbiting masses?
9. When you think of a “New England WASP,” what comes to mind? How do the Montgomerys hold up to your stereotype?
10. Sprinkled throughout this memoir are moments of violence or extreme emotional reaction, mostly the result of days, months, and sometimes years of repression. Identify each of these moments and discuss how they reveal the private struggles of the people involved.
11. The author spends a lot of time describing Big Dad’s hands as she moves with him through the final months of his life. Discuss the appearance and significance of hands and the ways the author uses them as a symbol.
12. The three Montgomery children each sped away from their childhood and its memories as soon as they were able. Yet, as their father declines, they spend a lot of time recollecting their lives at Four Corner Farm. What changes do you see happening to them and between them, due to revisiting these memories?
13. Lee, in particular, obsesses about her relationships with her parents and siblings, who have left her feeling disconnected and abandoned for different reasons over the years. Discuss her conflicting needs to be both close and distant from her family at various points in her life.
14. *The Things Between Us* explores the dying “blueblood” New England lifestyle, thus providing a fascinating window into an American subculture on the wane. What is the town of Framingham, Massachusetts, like? In what ways is the Montgomerys’ world just like any American family’s? In what ways is it different?
15. Many authors write memoirs in order to better deal with their painful experiences. In detailing his life and death, how has Lee Montgomery paid homage to her father? What do you think about her portrayal of her mother, considering the facts of their history together? What clues do you see in *The Things Between Us* that reveal how the author has or hasn’t been able to come to terms with her family’s love- and resentment-filled past?

### **Enhance Your Book Club Experience**

Research the Boston, Massachusetts area and the small community of Framingham. You can start with information and photos at [www.visitnewengland.com](http://www.visitnewengland.com) and <http://www.visit-massachusetts.com/boston.html>. Have a “Yankee” party and go horseback riding, apple-picking, drink cocktails, and share what you’ve learned of the region’s history. You can even have everyone prepare and bring New England foods, such as those found at [www.newenglandrecipes.com](http://www.newenglandrecipes.com). Learn about the ongoing foxhunting tradition (though of course they don’t use real foxes anymore) that’s carried on by the Old North Bridge Hounds at [www.onbh.org](http://www.onbh.org)—you may even be able to follow one of their hunts.

As a group or individually, watch the movies *War of the Roses* (which the Montgomerys found hysterically funny) and *When a Man Loves a Woman* (a movie about the struggle a husband and child face in the wake of one woman’s alcoholism). Discuss the effects of alcoholism on all the Montgomerys, parents and children alike.