

Reading Group Guide

1. *The Shame of Losing* is what some may classify as a hybrid-style memoir, with a mash-up of vignettes, letters, and diary entries. Discuss the effectiveness of each. What purpose do they serve?
2. Pauline Boss was a researcher who studied families of soldiers who went missing in action. To make sense of the particular loss her clients felt, she used the term *boundary ambiguity*. Later, in the late '70s, that term was replaced with the phrase *ambiguous loss*, which served as explanation for the kind of loss that leaves a person searching for answers, thus complicating (and prolonging) the grieving process. Do you think there could be a “myth of closure” around grieving a person whose personality has changed? How is the ambiguous loss of mourning a person who is physically present, but not altogether there, different than mourning a death?
3. This book is filled with imagery around “man” things: ship hulls, helicopter log books, flight manuals, chainsaws, protective gear. What is your view on masculinity? How has its influence shaped your life?
4. The traditional wedding vows ‘In sickness and in health’ can take on a new meaning when partners face a crisis, including serious behavioral changes in mental health. Have you encountered major healthcare obstacles in your partnerships? What happened? How might the expectations around providing care to children be different than the obligations one has to an adult partner in a committed relationship?
5. Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is often called a silent epidemic, in part because the hurt parts of the brain are hidden. We know there are large numbers of athletes, veterans, prisoners, and victims of intimate partner abuse who have sustained multiple blows/concussions that impact the rest of their lives with work and relationships. Sarah reminds us of the complicated nature of a hidden disability, writing, “Matt usually passed out after a long day in the sun, but that night he didn’t. It was hard to tell what caused brain drain and what did not. Earlier we’d been in town drinking cucumber martinis and it was a hundred degrees. Before that we’d been underground inside primordial lava tunnels. Julia took me aside and said, “I just can’t believe he has a brain injury. It doesn’t seem like anything’s wrong.” What kind of impact does having a serious injury going unnoticed have on families? How important is community validation to you when you are hurt or sick?
6. What are your thoughts on infidelity? Do you have any experience with it, and if so, what?
7. Sarah Cannon writes that “I’d consider the happy-seeming couples at the parties we’d go to and wonder what it was about me that wanted that so bad. It wasn’t the vacations or the clothes or the jobs, but the *connection* it seemed like they enjoyed with each other. I was envious of what I imagined were there stressors, like which summer camps to send

their kids too, or how to find a quality math tutor. I knew that may have been petty, but I couldn't help it. I wanted a strong connection. I wanted security." Is this true for you? To what degree have you caught yourself feeling envious of a friend's relationship or financial status? Are there times in your life when you do this more often than others? Do you have thoughts on how one might disable this kind of self-imposed suffering?

8. In her acknowledgements, Sarah Cannon writes that "memory is fickle and contestable. This version is only mine." What is your take on permission to tell a story? Have you ever wanted to share a true story you felt wasn't yours to share?
9. *The Shame of Losing* deals with an immediate response to a confusing kind of grief. How does the gift of time play into telling these kinds of tough stories? How might the telling of this story be different if more time had passed?