

CHOICE WORDS: WRITERS ON ABORTION

BOOK DISCUSSION GUIDE

The political arguments about abortion have been made repeatedly; in some ways there is nothing else left to say, and yet so much more needs to be said. That's why I put together *Choice Words: Writers on Abortion*.

Here you will encounter writings from classic and contemporary writers that invoke grief, defiance, fear, shame, desperation, love, awe, tenderness, regret, compassion, hope, despair, resolve, rage, triumph, relief, and peace. Here are writers from the sixteenth through twenty-first centuries, across ethnicities, cultures, genders, and sexualities, including US writers of diverse backgrounds and voices from six continents, sharing how class, patriarchy, race and ethnicity, wealth, poverty, and faith traditions impact our understanding and experience of abortion.

The powerful writings in *Choice Words* shine light on the shaming, silence, isolation, and violence that limit reproductive freedom. They give words to the emotional and physical toll of cultural, political, and religious restrictions. And they point the way towards the individual and collective courage to claim our full humanity.

I believe that literature can help to transform the stalled conversation by helping us to understand both the universality and the uniqueness of each abortion and its relationship to human integrity and justice. I hope *Choice Words* will help spark these new kinds of conversations; the questions here are a start. More discussion ideas may be found in the book's "Foreword" and "Introduction." Thank you for starting a conversation.

— Annie Finch, Editor, *Choice Words: Writers on Abortion*

TIPS ON STARTING A BOOK DISCUSSION CIRCLE

How often will your discussion group meet? One afternoon can make for a powerful discussion. Or, since *Choice Words* is divided into five sections, a series of five gatherings may be a nice way to experience the book as a whole and build connection within your group. You could meet once a week or once a month. After you're done discussing *Choice Words*, maybe your circle will decide to continue meeting.

What is the nature of your circle? Will it be limited to a certain gender or age group? To those who have had an abortion? As the facilitator of the circle, you have the right to set the boundaries you want so that participants will feel completely comfortable sharing their thoughts and perhaps their experiences.

If you are sitting in a circle, make sure that everyone can see everyone else in the circle. Consider using a special item that is passed around the circle from one speaker to the next, making sure everyone gets a chance and speakers are not interrupted.

Each discussion should have at least one facilitator to ask questions and keep things moving. If energy sags or things bog down too much in the personal, bring it back to the book. Quote something from the text, ask a book-based question, or bring a new piece from the book into the discussion. Because the book is something that everyone in the circle has in common, it belongs to everyone and no-oneso it will feed connection.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(To help you find the suggested authors' works, see the index below)

1. *Choice Words* is divided into sections focused on mind, body, heart, will, and spirit. But of course, these categories are fluid and overlapping. As you read, are there pieces that you would have placed into a different section? Why? What are the assumptions, experiences, or thoughts that underlie this feeling?
2. Works by Kamen and Arcana are based in their experience assisting people to find abortions in the 1970s. What did you learn about that period from reading them? How did you respond to the pieces by Falk, Shah, and Kelapure about more recent news events? What lessons can contemporary women learn from the older texts in *Choice Words*? (There is a timeline of works published before 1990 near the end of the book).
3. The contributions by Hanratty and Neuschwander are about a very different kind of abortion than the majority of pieces in the book. So are the contributions by Ashok, Malaviya, Sharma, and Yan. What did you learn from these writings? How does reading them affect your understanding of the other works in the book?
4. Abortion is affected by the intersections of numerous social categories. How do issues of race and racism play out in the works by Hughes, Kamen, Shange, Felix, and others? How does disability impact the abortion experience in the pieces by Finger? How does class interact with abortion in the excerpt from Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* and in Wollstoncraft, LeGuin, Naylor, Smith, Ai, Hughes, Parker, and others? What is the intersection of abortion and sexuality in the excerpt from Rita Mae Brown's classic lesbian novel? How do gender and abortion intersect in Reeser, Malaviya, Muten, and Sharma, and others?
5. Religion and spirituality are interwoven into many of these works of literature. "Mainstream" religious beliefs affect the experience of abortion in Betts, Morris, Shah, Kamal, Fried, Levy, Stefanescu, Hauser, and others, while Maia, Oates, Finch, Collinges, Morris, Earthschild and Willow, Silko, Coyle, Paris, Atwood in "Surfacing," and others engage with more earth-centered spiritual approaches. What is the experience of reading these works in relation to each other?
6. Much of the contemporary controversy over abortion in the U.S. concerns the effects that people assume abortion has on women's psychological states. How does reading this book affect your sense of the real psychological effects? How do feelings of shame or regret about abortion play out in McDonnell, Hanratty, Shange, Akresh-Gonzalez, Earthschild and Willow, Larkin, Calbert, Shah, Parker, Brooks, and in many pieces in the "Heart" section? How do these pieces interact with works that present an abortion as something to be celebrated with little or no reservation, such as Rivera, Ghodsee, Mahlangu, Alvarado, Josephine, Steinem, and Piercy's "Right to Life"?
7. Friends, children, boyfriends, and husbands play important roles in many of these works (more information may be found in the lists below). But mothers appear most consistently. What can we learn about the role of mothers from the works by Conrad, Haggard, LeGuin, Kenyan Teenagers, Kamal, Cooper, Hughes, Browne, LeDuc, Weisert, Kane, Hauser, Saphra, Calbert, and others?
8. In many of these pieces, abortion is a turning point. What do the characters learn from their abortions in Drabble, West, Clifton, Smedley, Brown, Valente, Mahlangu, Rodriguez, and others?

9. How do politics and nationalism intersect with abortion, in works by Saleh, Johnson, Quinlan, Saphra, Blandiana, Yan, Salach, and others? What is the role of political protest in the pieces by LeGuin, Muske-Dukes, Oates, DeDakis, Levin, Bruce, Alleyne, and Haggard?
10. How do different cultural and social traditions affect the experience of abortion throughout the book? You may want to look at the pieces by Reeser, Jhabvala, Kamal, Cooper, Le, Hughes, Stefanescu, Tam Lin, Conrad, and Kenyan Teenagers. After reading this book, which approaches to abortion and ways of handling it do you find most positive or useful?
11. What is the relationship between literature and activism? How can we use *Choice Words* to convince neighbors and friends to commit to reproductive justice and to create a culture of “abortion without apology?”
12. How can we bring *Choice Words* to the most marginalized people among us?
13. How else can we use *Choice Words* and Choice Words Action to build feminist community?

Some Other Themes for Possible Discussion

Doctors, Midwives, Abortion Providers

Cruz, LeGuin, West, Jhabvala, Maia, Manning, Burton, Rol, Steinem, Reeser, Hawkins, Lim, DeSilva-Johnson

Dream-like or non-realistic images and events

Acker, Lamb, Shmailo, Nao, Rich, Sexton, Nalkowska, Goldwasser, Wetherington, Mahlangu, Anderson, O’Hara, Hume

Existing children

Cooper, Naylor, Clifton, Hanratty, White

Father of the embryo/fetus

West, Peacock, Alvarez, Moss, Smedley, Rodriguez, Kamal, Olds, Hassanzadeh-Mostafavi, Sodergran, Peacock, Shange

Friends

Ernaux, Rodriguez, Wolpe, Aboulela, Alvarez, Nalkowska, Carr

Illegal Abortion

Enriquez, Rivera, Nalkowska, Alvarado, Lorde, Peri Rossi, Drabble, Cusack

Nature

Atwood, Geddes, Coyle, Inez, Chin-Tanner, Townsend, Sodergran, Korn, Stone, Wheeler, Walker, Silko, Peacock, Coffman

Speaking to the embryo/fetus

Clifton, Alleyne, Day, Brooks, Finch, Doubiago, Johnson, Davis, Starhawk, DiPrima

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