



# READING GROUP GUIDE

## INTRODUCTION:

Jaclyn Westlake's unforgettable coming-of-age novel covers it all: Rosie Benson is the lost twenty-something main character struggling to figure out her life, find a new job, pay rent, navigate her parents' divorce after 30 years of marriage, find and keep love, accept her best friend's shocking betrayal, and deal with the death of her favorite family member, her great-aunt Dotty... *all at once*.

It is a quirky, relatable, and reflective debut perfect for fans of Sophie Kinsella, Beth O'Leary, and Lori Nelson Spielman! *Dear Dotty* is a must-read for women's fiction and coming-of-age novel readers alike, and everything you could ever need if you have ever felt lost navigating adulthood and wondered what else life has in store for you.

This reading group guide will help you better understand the lessons and messages to take away from Aunt Dotty's wisdom and Jaclyn Westlake's writing. These thoughtful questions will guide you through Rosie Benson's perspective during her journey through multiple life lessons.

## READING GROUP GUIDE:

1. *Dear Dotty's* main character, Rosie Benson, does not have it together. She is a lost twenty-something going through several traumatic life lessons at once – from getting fired from her job to mourning the death of her favorite and closest family member, her great-aunt Dotty. What drew you to pick up and read this book?
2. Dotty Polk and Rosie Benson are two very free-spirited characters, as described by Rosie's mother, and are different from the rest of their family. They both elected to not live a formulaic and nuclear life. What are the most intriguing qualities about Dotty and Rosie to you? What makes them stand out to you?
3. Jaclyn Westlake wrote Rosie and Dotty's characters to be highly relatable and authentic. Were there any moments from the book when you felt safe, understood, and seen? Can or have you ever related to either character at some point in your life?
4. What was your reaction to Marcia's shocking, twisty "betrayal" of Rosie? Do you think that Rosie reacted appropriately in the situation? Describe how you would have handled a situation like that with your best friend. Do you think Rosie and Marcia successfully redeemed themselves at the end of the book?
5. At what point in the book did Rosie truly lose herself? Was it during the news of Dotty's death, the family gathering in the delivery room, or another event? At what point in the book do you think Rosie determined she needed to turn things around?
6. In chapter 13, Rosie visits Happy Hooves Animal Sanctuary and has one of the best days of her life since losing Dotty and her job. Do you think that was the moment she realized that being at the Happy Hooves Animal Sanctuary was what truly brought her joy and hope moving forward? Discuss what you think went through Rosie's mind that day.

7. In chapter 29, the themes of control and agency emerge as Rosie contemplates the status of her job at Le Agency. There is a moment when Rosie makes an important choice about her job and Nadine's presence in her life. Do you think Rosie needed to have this realization with Nadine to make changes in her overall life? What do you think was the life lesson she learned in that moment?
8. Towards the end of the book, Rosie comes to terms with dealing with the presence and role of men and relationships in her life. Do you think Donovan taught Rosie a lesson about herself and helped her figure out her personal needs and goals? Talk about how Rosie's experience with Donovan could have shaped her outlook on men and relationships.
9. The urgency around the themes of "missing the memo" and missing out come up often in the book, from fostering committed relationships to starting families and settling down with a partner. This is what makes *Dear Dotty* such a relatable and real coming of age novel for many twenty-something year old readers. Do you think Westlake realistically illustrated the societal pressures of "growing up" in her book? How did you feel about these common societal expectations and their "timelines" on current twenty-somethings after finishing the book?
10. Did reading about Dotty's outlook on life change the way you think about your future after reading this book? If so, what aspects about Dotty's lifestyle resonated with you most? Do or did you have a Dotty figure in your life?
11. *Dear Dotty* is all about the journey of growing up and figuring things out as a young adult amidst crisis and existential confusion. What are some of the lessons you learned and took away from this book and who would you like to give a copy of this book to?

## AUTHOR Q&A:

1. What did the writing process for this book look like? How long was the writing process and what did your writing routine look like?

When I set out to write *Dear Dotty*, all I knew was that I wanted to tell a story about a woman in her twenties trying - with mixed results - to carve out her own path. That's it! I wasn't quite sure where the story was going so it took me two years to finish the first draft.

Once I'd gotten to know my characters and their stories, I had a much easier time with revisions. It took me about a year and several more drafts before I felt like the book was finished.

Throughout this process, I learned that I'm most productive in the mornings, with a big iced coffee and my sweet little dog within arms' reach. I started out writing 500 words a day and slowly worked up to 2,000 (on a good day). I also learned that there's a limit to how much attention I can dedicate to writing on any given day. After a certain period of time, that part of my brain shuts off.

2. Did any specific authors or books inspire you to write *Dear Dotty*? Who are some of your writing influences?

As a kid, I was an avid reader and a Scholastic Book Fair enthusiast. Some of my early influences were Ann M. Martin, R.L. Stine, and Judy Blume. I also loved every Nancy Drew Book I could get my hands on.

Sophie Kinsella, Helen Fielding, Candace Bushnell, and Lauren Weisenberger, were very important to me in my twenties (and to this day!). I also adore Lori Nelson Spielman, Andrew Sean Greer, Kristin Chen, Talia Hibbert, Emily Henry, and Taylor Jenkins Reid (I know I'm missing a few!).



3. After years of working in the recruiting and human resources industries, what inspired you to start working on your debut novel, *Dear Dotty*? What was the push? How important was it to include the recruiting storyline in the novel?

I always wanted to write a novel, but the concept felt so abstract to me. For years, it was something that I would do “someday.” I think I started to pivot towards writing after I quit an HR job at a rather miserable company and started a resume writing business to keep myself busy while I figured out what to do next. That led me to a career advice column and a freelance writing career. Working with editors, meeting deadlines, and hearing from readers who connected with something I wrote gave me the confidence boost I needed to start working on *Dear Dotty*.

I wanted Rosie to experience a career as a recruiter because I thought it would help her to become more empathetic while allowing her to better understand where Raj was coming from when he fired her. I also wasn't sure where I was going with this story, so I figured it would be best to write what I know and for me, that was recruiting.

4. What do you think are the best and most admirable qualities about Rosie and Dotty?

I admire Rosie's willingness to change her mind when presented with new information. Her opinions about the people in her life evolve as she comes to understand them better, and most importantly, she *wants* to understand them better. I think she's going to turn out to be a very empathetic as a person - like a softer version of Dotty.

Dotty is blunt and honest to a fault without being cruel. That's a tough needle to thread! I think that comes from being truly comfortable with herself. Dotty is not a people pleaser and doesn't worry about how she'll be perceived, which empowers her to be honest with the people around her and with herself. I think that might be the key to living a fully authentic life.

**5. How much would you say you related to Rosie Benson? Were any of the moments in the book inspired by real-life events or experiences?**

I relate to Rosie quite a bit! I had no idea what I was doing for most of my twenties. I suffered through miserable jobs, stressed about making rent every month, had fallings out with friends, dated the wrong guys, and lost relatives that I loved dearly. Rosie's experiences are her own, but the things I went through when I was her age served to inspire the way she reacts.

I think the most real-life-inspired scene in the book is when Rosie gets fired. I relate to Kara Chen, the Driftwood "People Operations Liaison" so much! The worst part of working in HR is having to end people's employment. It's awful and I never want to have to do it again. I always felt so terrible for the people we were letting go, but I couldn't really show it. Plus, most managers were deeply uncomfortable having those conversations (like Raj!) so it usually fell on me to keep things moving forward. Working in HR, I felt like I always had to be buttoned-up like Kara, but I was just as much of a mess as everyone else.

**6. What are some universal experiences you think every twenty-something should go through as part of their learning and growing journeys?**

Screwing up! Whatever that looks like - maybe you get fired from a job or fall out with a friend or disappoint your family. Failure is an inevitable part of life - especially when you're still figuring out who you are. As long as you stay open to learning, growing, and changing, you'll be fine. In the meantime, embrace the mess!



## 7. Did anyone in your life inspire the character of Dotty Polk?

Dotty is the person I wish I'd had in my life - especially in my twenties. There's something reassuring and inspiring about being in the presence of an older, wiser person who's lived an unabashedly authentic life. While I didn't have a Dotty, I did have an Uncle Ray and an Auntie Wilma - and there's a dash of each of them in Dotty.

Ray and Wilma were my grandfather's brother and sister and to say they had big personalities would be an understatement. Ray never married or had children. He lived in an eclectic flat in San Francisco, hosted marathon family lunches, and was impossible to get off the phone. When I was a kid - maybe eight - he told my mom that he thought I was an artist. It took me a while to find my art form, but he was onto something.

Wilma was a force - the epitome of a strong Italian woman. She commanded any room she walked into - literally announcing herself with a robust, "Wilma's here!" whenever she arrived. I'll never forget this one Christmas where she said something to me that made me feel completely at peace with myself. I was a newlywed who wasn't planning to have children (the horror!) and Wilma pulled me aside to tell me that it was perfectly fine if I didn't want children, that she could see how well my husband and I treated each other, and that she knew I was going to live a great life. She made me feel understood. That's a very powerful thing.

I miss them both desperately and wish I could share *Dear Dotty* with them - I know they'd have lots of thoughts to share with me!

## 8. So many of the moments in the books are incredibly relatable. How important was it to you to make this book relatable to your audience?

Making another person feel seen is incredibly powerful. I love it when I share something with a friend—whether it's an outlandish insecurity, a deep, dark fear, or a self-deprecating meme—and they say, "Oh my god, ME TOO!"

If I can create one of those moments for a reader, then I'll be thrilled.



**9. Who is *Dear Dotty* for? Who do you want to read the book?**

*Dear Dotty* is for anyone who's ever felt lost, left out, or left behind (spoiler alert: you're probably doing just fine). I think animal lovers, pet parents, aunties, aspiring aunties, and anyone who is currently surviving or has survived the rollercoaster that is their twenties will enjoy it.

**10. What message do you want readers to take away from *Dear Dotty* or learn from Dotty Polk herself?**

That there isn't just one "right" way to be. Didn't pursue a fancy corporate job? That's cool. Don't want kids? That's fine. Never found your lifelong partner? Okay!

But, if you want some or all of those traditional things, that's great, too! I admire that Dotty doesn't expect anyone to follow her lead. She's living her life her way and if her family or friends want something different, she thinks that's wonderful - so long as they truly want it for themselves. If Dotty thinks you're trying to squeeze yourself into a box you don't belong in, she'll call you on it. But if you've found the box that fits you perfectly, she'll be there to cheer you on.

**11. Dogs and animals play a significant role in the book. What are your personal ties to dogs and animals and why was it important to include them in Rosie's story?**

You probably won't be surprised to learn that I'm the person who knows all of the dogs in my neighborhood but couldn't tell you the names of their parents. Growing up, our family always had dogs (Zeke, Sam, Sneakers, Bella, Brody, and now Louie and Lola) so I always knew that I would adopt a dog when I was an adult. My husband and I rescued our dachshund mix, Indy from a shelter back in 2010 and he's such a sweet, funny, eccentric, long-bodied little guy. We love him so much.

I, of course, love all types of animals, too. I used to volunteer at a farmed animal sanctuary where I got to spend time with cows, goats, pigs, sheep, and chickens and it was such a fun and rewarding experience.

12. The decision to have a childfree lifestyle by Dotty and Rosie's realization of that are important parts of the book. How important was it to you to include the childfree themes in a book for twenty-somethings who may feel the impending societal pressure of forming a family? What would Dotty have to say about that?

The farther you get into your twenties (and even more so in your thirties!) the more intense the pressure to Grow Up and do Grown-Up Things becomes. Worse, if you don't want the things we're told we should have, you're often met with befuddlement ("but who will take care of you when you're older?"), disbelief ("you'll change your mind"), or sometimes - unfortunately - disdain ("how selfish!"). I wanted to create a character who had made unconventional choices and was totally happy with the way her life had turned out because there are a lot of people like Dotty out there and they're awesome.

Dotty would say that if you want kids, go for it! But, she'd also say that not having or not wanting kids is totally fine, too. In the end, you're the one who has to live with your decisions, so make sure you're building a life that you want - not one that everyone else thinks you should have.



## ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB:

1. Visit author **Jaclyn Westlake's website** for more information about herself, her career, her writing projects, upcoming events, and her blog.
2. Visit Jaclyn's website for **career advice** and learn more about her experience as a recruiter (does that ring a bell?) and human resources manager through her writing on The Muse **here!**
3. Check out Jaclyn's social media profiles on **Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter/X** for upcoming *Dear Dotty* promotional content!
4. Follow Jaclyn Westlake on **Goodreads** and **BookBub** to see her most recent reads and reviews.
5. If you're an aspiring or established writer, check out **this page** for advice and resources from Jaclyn. This page is filled with links to writing programs, writing retreats, writing podcasts, editorial contacts, and more to kickstart and/or further promote your career as a writer.
6. Here are some fun ideas and activities you can do with your bookish friends at your next *Dear Dotty* book club meeting:
  - Host the book club meeting at your local park and bring your pets! Take photos of your pets with *Dear Dotty*, and post them on social media tagging Jaclyn Westlake **here**.
  - Host a postcard-writing session together for the "Dotty" in your life. Ask yourself who you would share your biggest life updates and questions with.
  - Make a playlist together for each book's character! Or assign a character to each book club member, and present your playlist to one another at the next book club meeting.

- Go to your local animal sanctuary together and live out Rosie Benson's dreams! If you're interested, talk about *Dear Dotty* with the members of the animal sanctuary and share the book with them.
- Host a charcuterie board night with your bookish friends, and have everyone bring character-specific drinks and food. If you want to film your bookish soirée, don't forget to post about the book and Jaclyn Westlake on social media and tag her **here**.
- Write a note to Jaclyn together and send it to her here: <https://www.jaclynwestlake.com/contact>