

# Dear Joseph Reader Guide

*For book clubs, memoir readers, faith-deconstruction communities, and readers drawn to stories of survival, identity, and healing.*

*Dear Joseph* is a memoir about what happens when love is confused with control, when religion becomes a language of fear, and when one person slowly fights his way back to tenderness, truth, and selfhood.

This version is written for stronger reader engagement on an author website, so each section is shorter, more inviting, and easier to scan while still reflecting the memoir's central concerns: shame, silence, family systems, faith, trauma, art, memory, and recovery.

## Why readers connect

Readers are likely to connect with this memoir because it joins vivid childhood memory with questions many people quietly carry into adulthood: What happens when faith is used to control instead of comfort? How does a child survive conditional love? What does it take to reclaim identity after years of silence?

The manuscript repeatedly returns to emotionally charged scenes involving religious pressure, family cruelty, secrecy, creative refuge, bodily memory, and eventual healing, making it especially resonant for book clubs that want both literary discussion and personal reflection.

## Best audiences

- Book clubs interested in memoir, trauma recovery, family systems, and resilience.
- Readers processing religious harm, purity culture, spiritual abuse, or faith deconstruction.
- LGBTQ+ readers and allies interested in identity, belonging, shame, and chosen love.
- Readers who appreciate lyrical prose, psychological insight, and emotionally layered life writing.

## Conversation starters

- Which moment in the memoir first made the emotional stakes feel clear?
- Where does Joseph begin to separate God from the people who misrepresented God to him?
- How do silence, ritual, and family storytelling shape identity in this book?
- What role do art, music, memory, and ordinary tenderness play in survival?

- Which scenes feel most connected to healing rather than only endurance?

## **Chapter highlights**

### **Prologue: The First Lesson**

The prologue is a powerful entry point because it shows a child learning that joy can be treated as danger and obedience as safety.

#### **Readers may want to discuss:**

- How the Santa Claus scene becomes about far more than childhood belief.
- The role of the mother's certainty and the father's silence.
- The idea that wonder itself can become suspect inside a controlling home.

### **Chapter 1: The Inheritance of Shame**

This chapter introduces the emotional rules of Joseph's world: holiness as performance, silence as discipline, and shame as a family inheritance.

#### **Readers may want to discuss:**

- How the chapter defines shame without always naming it directly.
- Why domestic details, family rituals, and repeated stories matter so much.
- What early signs suggest Joseph already has an inner self that refuses full erasure.

### **Chapter 2: The Gospel of Division**

This chapter expands the private damage of the household into public church life, showing how spiritual authority can magnify conflict, fear, and exclusion.

#### **Readers may want to discuss:**

- How a family's internal dysfunction becomes theology in public.
- Why church division affects Joseph so deeply.
- Where this chapter begins to separate true faith from performed righteousness.

## **Middle chapters**

As the memoir moves forward, readers can expect the stakes to deepen through adolescence, secrecy, art, music, shame, bodily memory, and the struggle to form an identity apart from inherited fear.

These chapters work especially well for discussion when readers track what Joseph is losing, what he is protecting, and what small forms of freedom begin to appear anyway.

**Readers may want to discuss:**

- Which relationships offer safety, even briefly.
- How creativity functions as witness, refuge, and rebellion.
- What the memoir suggests about masculinity, softness, and survival.

**Final chapters and epilogue**

The later chapters and epilogue turn toward aftermath, memory, embodiment, grief, adult perspective, and the difficult work of becoming whole without pretending to be untouched.

The manuscript closes by revisiting childhood lessons from the vantage point of survival, making the ending especially rich for discussion about forgiveness, boundaries, identity, and the difference between being healed and being unscarred.

**Readers may want to discuss:**

- What the memoir means by wholeness.
- How adulthood changes Joseph’s understanding of his parents without erasing harm.
- Why the ending feels earned rather than sentimental.

**Themes to feature on the website**

Theme	Why it matters
Shame and silence	The memoir shows how shame is taught, reinforced, and internalized in both family life and faith settings.
Spiritual harm	Religion is depicted not only as belief, but as a system that can be used to control, punish, and divide.
Art and witness	Drawing, music, and language become ways of staying alive and telling the truth.

Identity and becoming	The memoir traces the slow work of discovering a self that exists beyond fear and performance.
Healing and tenderness	Recovery emerges through memory, embodiment, chosen love, and ordinary forms of care.