

BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

Introduction:

Mixed Tape is a coming-of-age story set against the backdrop of the 1980s—a decade shaped by pop music, political conservatism, and the AIDS epidemic. Through Will Rafferty's journey, the novel explores identity, secrecy, friendship, family, and the long, uneven process of learning to live honestly. At its heart, ***Mixed Tape*** is both a "coming-out" story and a "staying-in" story—about finding the courage not just to reveal who you are, but to remain present in your own life.

Discussion Questions

Identity, Fear & "Staying In"

Will describes his life as shaped by avoidance. In what ways does he "run," and what finally begins to change that pattern?

The novel suggests that coming out is only the beginning. What does "staying in" mean to you in the context of Will's journey?

How does fear—especially fear tied to the AIDS crisis—shape Will's choices, relationships, and sense of self?

Love, Desire & Complicated Relationships

Will has deep emotional connections with both Kevin and Chris. How do these relationships differ, and what does each represent for him?

Why do you think Will is drawn to Kevin despite knowing that relationship cannot become what he wants?

Chris offers Will something different—what is it, and why does Will initially struggle to accept it?

Family & Conflict

Discuss Will's relationship with his father. How does it influence Will's internalized fear and self-perception?

How does the confrontation with his father function as a turning point in the novel?

Will's mother is largely absent but emotionally important. What role does she play in shaping who Will becomes?

Politics, Society & the AIDS Crisis

How does the political environment in Ottawa shape Will's understanding of himself and the world?

The novel portrays a culture that often ignores or dismisses the AIDS crisis. How does this affect Will personally?

In what ways is the novel political without being overtly didactic?

Music as Emotional Language

The mixed tape from Chris is central to the novel. What does it represent for Will?

How does music function as a way for Will to process emotions he is unable voice?

If you were to create a mixed tape for Will for different parts of his story, how might it change?

Growth, Regret & Redemption

Will often reflects on missed opportunities and regrets. Which moments felt most significant to you?

How does the novel handle the idea of “second chances”?

By the end of the story, has Will truly changed? Why or why not?

Themes to Explore Further

- Identity and self-acceptance
- Fear and avoidance
- Love versus safety
- The impact of historical context on personal lives
- Music as memory and emotional expression
- The difference between surviving and living
- The role of ‘place’ or location in the story

Fun Activity: Build Your Own Mixed Tape

- Create a playlist inspired by the novel:
- Choose 3-5 songs that reflect Will’s journey
- Assign each song to a moment in the story
- Share and discuss your choices with the group
- Which song best captures Will at his most afraid? His most honest?

Further Conversation Starters

- How might Will's story be different if it were set today?
- What parts of the novel felt most personal or relatable?
- Did any character surprise you? Why?

Final Reflection

Mixed Tape poses a quiet, powerful question: What does it take to stop running from your own life?

Host's Notes:

Date of meeting: _____

Attendees: _____

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Discussion Notes:

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