



HAPPY FAMILY by Tracy Barone
Reading Group Guide

1. Compare the Cheri we meet at the beginning of the novel to the Cheri we come to know by the end. Has she undergone significant personal changes over the course of the novel?
2. Did you find Cheri to be a sympathetic character? Why or why not? Is your enjoyment of a novel affected by the likeability of its protagonist? Why do you think so many readers expect protagonists—especially female protagonists—to be likeable?
3. Several times in the novel, Cheri realizes she hasn't really "seen" the people she is closest to. Do you think she always "sees" herself? In what ways do her perceptions of her family members hinder her real understanding of them? Have you ever realized that your perceptions of someone have prevented you from really "seeing" them?
4. Despite his flaws, did you find Sol to be a sympathetic character? What did you make of his decision to surprise Cici with baby Cheri?

5. At the end of the novel, we find out that Cheri eventually has a baby of her own. What type of parent do you think she will be? Do you think her parenting style will be influenced by the way she was raised? If you have children of your own, was your parenting style influenced by the way you were raised? Did you actively try to raise your children differently from the way that your parents raised you?
6. What did you make of Cheri's decision not to tell Cici about Sol's affair? What would you have done if you were in her shoes?
7. On page 275, Dr. Vega says to Cheri: "We can look at everything we go through without judging it as good or bad, but as an opportunity for growth." Do you agree with this statement?
8. Discuss the role that forgiveness—both forgiveness of others and of ourselves—plays in the novel.
9. Near the end of the novel, Cheri refers to herself as "the sum of her secrets." What does that mean? Are you the sum of your secrets?
10. If you could, would you know the "whole story" of your family, or are some things better left unknown? Looking back, are there things about your family you wish your parents had told you, or told you sooner? Do you understand why they may have waited to disclose certain facts? Are there "family secrets" you'll hide from your children?
11. One of the novel's central questions is: can we ever see our parents outside of their roles as our parents. Do you think that's possible? Or can we only start to do this once we have children of our own?
12. Cheri talks to her therapist about having a "shadow" child growing up. Discuss the idea of shadow children, or shadow families, either through death, adoption where the child doesn't know his or her birth parent, even a projection of the family we wished we had. Do you have a shadow family?
13. Just as Cheri is about to leave Michael she glimpse the man she fell in love with. Do you think an extreme circumstance such as being diagnosed with terminal cancer can bring about major shifts in relationship? What other kinds of crisis can bring us back to finding an ember in ashes?