

NICK FULLER GOOGINS

author of The Great Transition

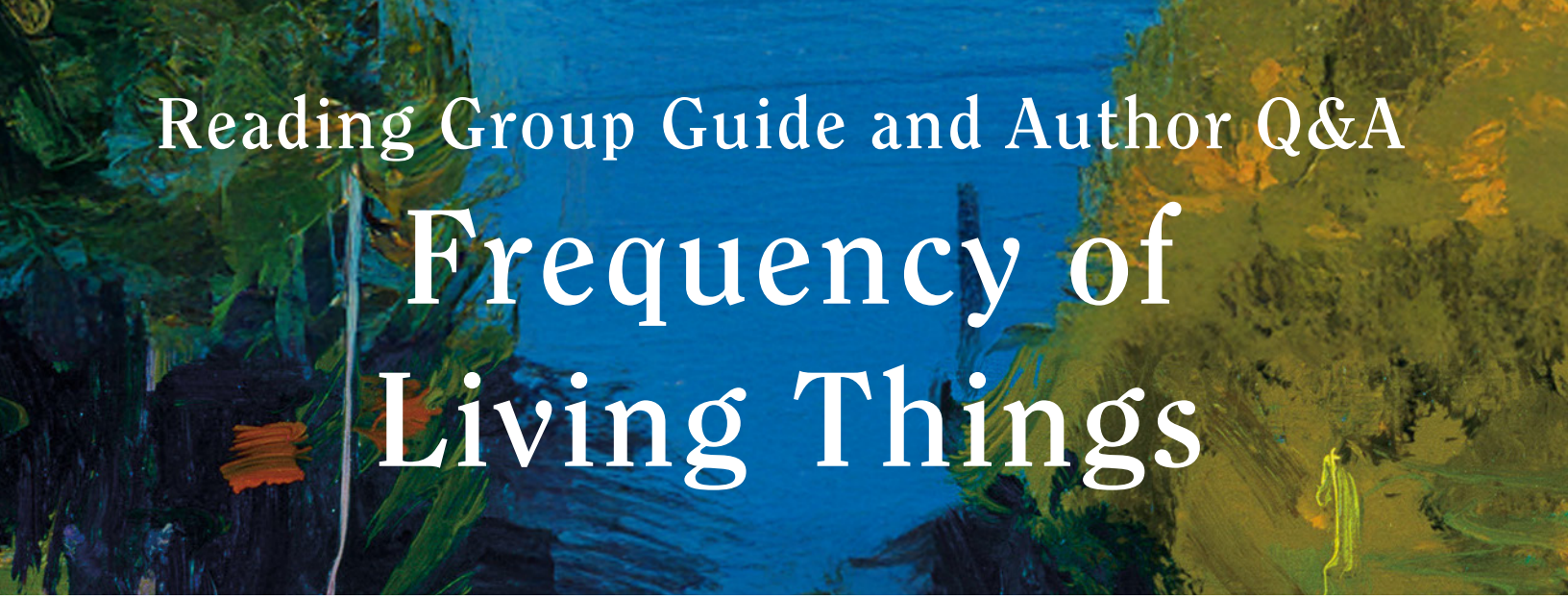
"A stirring family epic."

—*Harper's Bazaar*

The Frequency of Living Things

A Novel





Reading Group Guide and Author Q&A

Frequency of Living Things

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Josie is the youngest of the three Tayloe sisters but plays the role of caretaker for her older sisters and family. Is this similar to the sibling dynamics in your own family? How do you think sibling relationships differ based on birth order or other factors?
2. Emma has often been her twin sister's enabler when it comes to her addiction. Is she doing the right thing by helping her sister take drugs more safely or the wrong thing because she's helping her sister harm herself?
3. Emma struggles creatively without her sister Ara. Do you share this experience of having different but complimentary skills with a friend or a sibling? How do you handle this in your own life? How should Emma?
4. Josie, Ara, and Emma's mother Bertie often places doing good for society and the needy over the immediate needs of her children, using the justification "help who needs help the most". Do you agree with Bertie?
5. Ara writes: "So I decided right there to play it safe: one full week to detox from my sisters. Because family and opioids really aren't so different. Both can make you feel great until suddenly they don't." Do you think Ara is right about needing to detox from her sisters or is she misdiagnosing the problem? How do our families make us feel great and why do we need space from them sometimes?

6. Josie uses this metaphor to explain the unique bonds of *sisters*: “Ant colonies, as she never tired of explaining to anyone willing to listen, are complex social networks comprised almost exclusively of females. And not just females, but sisters, genetically speaking. Sisters who, thanks to the diploidic quirks of ant reproduction (of which almost nobody was willing to listen), share more DNA with one another than they do with their mother. Sisters who are ready to work and fight and sacrifice for each other without second thought.” In what ways is sisterhood or sibling relationships in general different from any other relationship?
7. Each sister processes their childhood and upbringing differently. How have they taken to or rejected what their mother Bertie has taught them? In what ways are sibling relationships and sisterhood different from other relationships?
8. Bertie doesn’t fulfill the role typically expected of mothers in society as a caretaker who puts her children first. What were your initial impressions of Bertie and did they change over the course of the novel as you learned her backstory or because of the actions she takes in the novel’s final act?

A CONVERSATION WITH NICK FULLER GOOGINS

1. What was your initial inspiration for the novel? Which character came to you first?

I grew up in a safe, woodsy part of Massachusetts, causing harmless mischief with my friends. We’d ring doorbells, throw snowballs at cop cars, jump in swimming pools, rearrange Christmas decorations. I had this image of a group of three young girls doing the same thing, and the novel took off as a series of “whys” and “what ifs”...Why are these girls left to themselves? What if they are sisters? What if their mother is too busy with work to look after them? Why is their mother so busy with work? What if she’s using work to avoid some past tragedy? What if that tragedy had to do with the girls’ father? Why does the youngest sister feel like she has to take care of her siblings? The youngest sister became Josie, the heart of the novel, and the story unraveled forwards in time from there, one “what if” leading to the next.

2. There is so much amazing science in the book, what got you interested in ants and how did you do your research?

Back when I was still in the early planning stages, I knew I wanted Josie to be a scientist, hyper-focused on the natural world as a way of escaping the traumas of life, both as a kid, and then into adulthood. This, again, came from the best parts of my childhood, exploring and kicking around the woods, the marshes, the vernal pools of New England. But what, exactly, would Josie study? I was visiting my mother, walking in back of her place, the fields teeming with slugs, ticks, dragonflies—*bugs!* I drove straight to the local library to check out every book on insects (all four of them), and learned that the gender breakdown of any ant colony is roughly 90% female. Even better, those many thousands of individual ants are all *sisters*, genetically speaking. I'd already planned for Josie to be a caretaker of her twin sisters, so you might understand my excitement. *What if Josie studied ants?* These little strokes of synchronicities make writing a novel so damn fun; it's like the universe is zapping down ideas and connections.

3. Do you listen to music while writing? What bands were you thinking of to model the Twins on?

I usually write in the morning, before work, which is some of the nicest, most meditative 45-60 minutes of my day, before I head into school to spend the next six hours in the same room as twenty-one wonderful, active, loud children. So no, I don't listen to music while writing! But because music was so central to the novel, I listened to a lot in the car, and while biking, or walking around. I also went to a lot of shows at small independent venues—the kind of bands I might not normally be drawn to, but decided to go, and mostly enjoy, in the name of research. A big inspiration behind Emma and Ara's band became Kathleen Hannah's two groups: Bikini Kill and Le Tigre. The band CocoRosie also influenced the Twins, though aesthetically more than musically. Lastly, the musician Jess Lamb became a big inspiration for Emma's deep, operatic, the kind of vaulting voice that gives you the chills every time.

4. What are your own sibling relationships like? What is so interesting to you about sisterhood specifically?

I have one brother who lives in Brooklyn, and I can't imagine life without him. When I can find a cheap ticket, I'll fly down for a weekend so we can spend eighteen hours straight playing some

insanely complex boardgame with a 50-page instruction manual. We fought as kids like most siblings, but now we get along great. We read the same sci-fi books, watch the same horror movies. We recently took a big trip together, along with our partners. Something else that got me thinking a lot about siblings was watching my father reconnect with his brothers after moving back to Maine. He now sees them weekly, after decades living far apart. Seeing my father and my uncles, now in their 70s and 80s, made me reflect on what a unique relationship siblings can be. If we're lucky, we'll know our siblings longer than our parents, our partners, even our children. The largest single impact on this novel, however, was witnessing how the relationship between my wife and her sister evolved over the past ten-plus years. We all lived together under the same roof during some very difficult times, which will bring out the best and worst in anybody, especially during moments of high stress and grief. It's easy to have a nice relationship when everything is fine. But when life takes unexpected, tragic turns, and you overcome it? That's the hard work, and it's been so special, so moving, so instructional, watching them navigate life together as sisters.

5. What are you writing next?

A heist novel! One family, overcome loss by working together to steal valuable artwork. It's been very fun research, walking around museums, art galleries, auction houses, and calculating how I might (hypothetically, of course...) escape with this painting or that. I also continue writing articles for *Men's Health* and other magazines, about education, boys, culture, and a healthier version of masculinity.