



INTRODUCTION BY MELISSA BRODER

The Ha-Ha

A NOVEL

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*This reading group guide for **The Ha-Ha** includes an introduction, discussion questions, and suggestions for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

INTRODUCTION

1. A “ha-ha” is defined as “a turfed ditch used to keep grazing livestock out of a garden or estate” (page vii). Discuss the irony of the title with your group. How does a ha-ha reflect the literal and figurative events of the novel?
2. The novel is written in the first person, almost mimicking a diary. How does this structure reveal, or obscure, the realities of Josephine’s experience? How might a different narration style change your understanding of Josephine?
3. Drifting through Oxford without having acquired “the knack of existing” (page 113), Josephine notes her social ineptitude: “I seemed reduced to silence by the things the others got round so easily” (page 5). Discuss her later diagnosis and how she might have been treated differently today.
4. The Ha-Ha deals with relationships between humans, and also humans’ relationships with animals. Josephine buys a copy of *Outline of Biology* to “acquire some understanding of the animals” (page 49). What do you think draws Josephine to animals, and what do you think her visualizations of animals symbolize?
5. Discuss with your group Josephine’s mother and her controlling behavior. How is this mother/daughter relationship supportive, or how is it detrimental to Josephine’s sense of herself?

6. Several factors make Josephine an outsider at the prestigious Oxford University. Do you think her class background contributes to her isolation from her peers?
7. Examine the relationship between Alasdair and Josephine. What do you think draws the two to each other?
8. On her first night at the hospital, Josephine describes herself as “already awakened and free” (page 15). How does Josephine’s understanding of herself conflict with how she is viewed and treated?
9. *The Ha-Ha* captures a bygone era of institutionalization. How would patients like Josephine and Alasdair be classified and treated today?
10. How do gendered expectations of behavior influence Josephine?
11. Revisit the final paragraph of the novel on page 166. Josephine is suddenly overcome with a desire for freedom. Where do you think she is headed? Why do you think she chose to leave?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Read Melissa Broder’s novels *Death Valley and Milk Fed*, which similarly deal with disaffected women struggling with mental health crises of their own. How would Broder’s protagonists fare in Jennifer Dawson’s 1950s?
2. Cast the actors of *The Ha-Ha* movie adaptation. Who do you think should play the protagonists?
3. Choose *Girl, Interrupted*; *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*; or *The Bell Jar*—books all set in the midcentury world of breakdowns—for your next book club pick.