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AUTHOR OF *In Five Years*

REBECCA SERLE

Once

and

Again



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—JODI PICOULT, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author

READING GROUP GUIDE

Once and Again



REBECCA SERLE

This reading group guide for Once and Again includes an introduction, discussion questions and a Q&A with author Rebecca Serle. 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

The women of the Novak family were each born with a gift: they can, just once, turn back time.

Lauren has known since she was fifteen that her mother Marcella saved Lauren's father from a deadly car accident. Dave is alive and happy, and out on the Malibu waves. But ever since, Marcella, her power spent, has lived in fear of what she won't be able to reverse. Her own mother, Sylvia, is her polar opposite: a free-spirited iconoclast with a glamorous past she only hints at. Lauren has spent her life between these two role models—and waiting for her own catastrophe to strike.

Then one summer, Lauren's husband takes a job in New York and she moves back to Broad Beach Road, back into her childhood home on the shores of Malibu. Lauren looks forward to surfing with her dad again and perhaps repairing an unspoken fracture in her relationship with her mother. What she doesn't expect is for the boy next to door to return home as well: Stone, Lauren's first love, who broke her heart nearly a decade before.

As Lauren falls into familiar patterns, with her family and, more dangerously, Stone, she finds herself thinking about all the choices, large and small, that have brought her to this moment. And wondering, finally, if one of them should be undone.

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In Chapter 2, Irina reflects, “*I knew from a young age I had this ticket...and it was my job to decide which of them all was worthy of taking back.*” How does this early understanding of the ticket frame the novel’s central question about choice, regret, and responsibility?
2. Lauren learns about the tickets just two months after her father’s accident—knowledge that both privileges her and burdens her. How does knowing her mother already used her ticket shape Lauren’s understanding of responsibility and fear? In what ways does the possibility that something could happen to her father again deepen Lauren’s sense of helplessness rather than comfort?
3. Lauren’s struggle with IVF places her and Leo in a relentless cycle of money, medical treatments, and cautious hopefulness. How does this ongoing pressure to “keep trying” strain their marriage emotionally and practically?
4. In Chapter 8, we discover that Marcella learns about the ticket only after experiencing a traumatic event. How do you think the timing of this influenced her decision to go back in time? How do you think that her decision might have differed if she had known about the ticket earlier in life?
5. Sylvia’s free-spirited embrace of life stands in sharp contrast to Marcella’s fear-driven caution. Which philosophy do you relate to more?
6. Dave’s heart condition reminds the family that preparation doesn’t prevent pain. How does Dave’s refusal to let fear dictate his life challenge Marcella’s worldview?
7. Like Lauren, Stone is grappling with the inevitability of an aging parent. How does this shared experience shape their reconnection?
8. When Lauren finally uses her ticket in Chapter 21, what was your immediate reaction? Relief, frustration, understanding—or something more complicated?
9. After Lauren’s redo, she briefly lives her dream life. Why do you think the author allows Lauren this happiness only to pull her back to reality—and how does that make the emotional impact stronger?
10. How does Sylvia’s ideology “*To long for things to be different is to fundamentally miss the lesson of life,*” resonate by the novel’s end? Do you agree with it?
11. We learn that Marcella lied to Lauren about her ticket. Does this revelation change how you view Lauren’s decision to use hers? Is it selfish—or deeply human?
12. Were you surprised that Lauren ultimately tells Leo the truth? What does this decision reveal about her growth and the novel’s final message?

A CONVERSATION WITH REBECCA SERLE

1. Magical realism plays a central role in all of your books. What drew you to the idea of tickets—a single, irreversible redo—as a way to explore deeply human emotions like regret, longing, and relational tension in *Once and Again*?

All of my books have magic but *Once and Again* is unique in that the magic is much more tangible. There is a ticket and a backstory. For me, the origin is almost a fairy tale. And I just like that there is this physical item. I felt that the shared act of using it could really unite the three women. I am at a place in my life now where I am wanting to talk less about how things might turn out and what might happen—and more about what has. How do we sit with the answers now instead of just asking the questions? I think there comes a moment in everyone’s life where it feels like things have “shaken out.” Whether it’s marriage or motherhood or something else. It’s not a bad thing, but it does make us take stock. And taking stock can often lead to looking backwards.

- 2. Each woman in the family learns about the ticket at a different stage of life. How intentional was that structure, and what did you hope it would reveal about how age, experience, and perspective shape the way we understand choice and consequence?**

Well there is age but there is also circumstance, which I think is almost more important here. Marcella and Lauren both learn about the ticket in a kind of trauma state. And that impacts the way they think about theirs—the way they cling to them and the idea of them. For Sylvia, she just grew up knowing. The ticket is just a part of her life and there's a calm to that. It's why we remember traumatic events and happy memories are harder to see in crystal detail. Pain and suffering is sharper, more focused. Ease has soft edges.

- 3. Marcella's fear is rooted in love, yet it profoundly shapes Lauren's emotional world. How did you approach writing motherhood as both fiercely protective and, at times, unintentionally limiting?**

I don't know if fear can be rooted in love, actually. I think fear gets in the way of love. And I think Marcella's fear for (and in some ways, of) her child gets in the way of their love story. I was not a mother when I wrote *Once and Again* but I am now and of course, I understand that fear. It is hard to let go, to live, to let them live, and to contemplate the fact that you are, inevitably, going to get it wrong. I think our job as parents is to work hard to not let fear get in the way.

- 4. Lauren spends much of the novel pulled between Sylvia's freedom and Marcella's caution. Was it important to you to explore the idea that children often define themselves by either becoming their parents—or deliberately trying not to?**

Yes. I think we are a product of what our parents do when they are not instructing us. We are a product of their decisions not for us but for themselves. And I think for Lauren, *Once and Again* is really the story of her coming to understand her mother for the first time. She is so in reaction against everything Marcella is—all the choices she made—that she needs to see her as human, too.

- 5. Did you always know how Lauren's story would resolve, or did her understanding of regret, acceptance, and agency evolve alongside you as you were writing?**

No, I never know how a story is going to resolve. It just made sense when I got there. As soon as I knew she was going to tell Leo the truth, everything began to fall into place. If *Once and Again* is about anything it is about the ordinary miracle of life. We don't need magic, as it turns out. Life delivers enough of it for us.

- 6. Marcella lies to Lauren about her ticket in an attempt to protect her. Do you see this decision as an act of maternal love, fear, or some complicated blend of both?**

Oh it's a deep act of maternal love. Readers may see it differently and that's OK. I always say that once a book is published it belongs to you as much as it belongs to me. But for me, yes, that is a deep, deep act of love. Perhaps the biggest thing Marcella got right. Telling a child that she died would have been cruel.

- 7. When readers finish *Once and Again*, what do you hope lingers with them—especially when it comes to longing for different outcomes and learning how to live with the lives we've chosen?**

I always hope that my novels make readers feel seen. Whether *Once and Again* is your fifth Rebecca Serle novel or your first, I want you to, somewhere, on some page, think *yes*. I want the specificity of Lauren, Marcella, and Sylvia's story to reveal something to you about your own life. And I hope you want to pass it on and talk about it.

REBECCA'S PERFECT DAY IN MALIBU



Arrive early to snag a table with a view for breakfast at **Paradise Cove Beach Café**.

Stock up on beach essentials at **Trancas Country Market**, explore the boutique shops, and grab a coffee or smoothie from **Vintage Grocers**.



Spend the afternoon at **Zuma Beach** for its family-friendly vibe or opt for **Point Dume's** excellent surf and breathtaking views.



End the night with a sunset dinner on the coast. If you're at **Geoffrey's**, the view from the patio is unbeatable! If you prefer a cozier Mediterranean vibe, go to **Taverna Tony**, then head to **Malibu Pier** for a stroll and quick photo op!

