

"Original, riveting, and moving." —GRAEME SIMSION, author of *The Rosie Project*

EVERYTHING

WAS



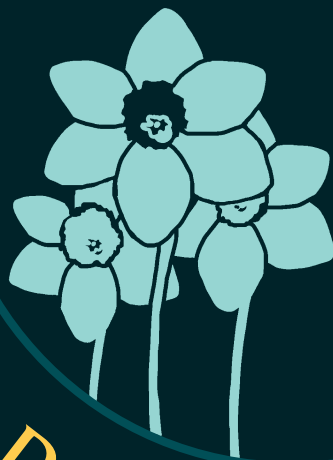
BEAUTIFUL AND

NOTHING AND

A NOVEL

HURT

BEN REEVES



READING
GROUP GUIDE

AVID
READER
PRESS

This reading group guide for **Everything Was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Ben Reeves. 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

An astonishing and deeply moving novel about finding beauty in the brevity of life, as narrated by the one who knows it best: Death.

Travis is Death in the modern world. He lives with his cat in a small, gray town. His job is to offer people comfort in their final hours of life, which he does without complaint or judgment. He's stoic, gentle, and a little naive, despite who he is, but he never tries to change anyone's fate. He is responsible for maintaining the balance of nature, and every life must eventually end.

Then Travis meets Dalia, a midwife, and her boisterous eight-year-old daughter Layla, who live across the hall, and despite his best attempts to keep his distance, Travis finds himself wholeheartedly embraced by other people for the first time. So it is with this seemingly unremarkable family that Travis begins to understand what it means to be truly alive—and therefore, what might be irrevocably lost in death.

Written with radiant warmth, wisdom, and compassion, *Everything Was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt* is a timeless and ultimately uplifting story about appreciating life, accepting its end, and finding our place in the universe—especially when it feels most impossible—that will resonate with anyone who has ever loved and lost or worried about time's passing.

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Brainstorm some adjectives to describe Travis, Dalia, Layla, Solomon, and Nick, and then think about how they would describe one another. How are they different? How are they similar? Which characters resonate most strongly with you?
2. In what ways does the British small-town setting contribute to the mood of *Everything Was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt*? How would this book feel if it took place in London, or in another country entirely?
3. What effect does the structure and style of *Everything Was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt* have on your reading experience? For example, how would your reading experience change if Reeves solely focused on the human elements of life, or if the entire book was told from Travis's first-person point of view?
4. Does it resonate with you that Death might manifest as a man like Travis? If you were to conceive your own embodiment of Death, what or how would it look, act, and sound like?
5. What are some turning points in Travis's relationship to the living? What is it about Dalia and her daughters that has such a strong effect on him?
6. How did your feelings toward Dalia evolve over the course of the novel? Can you think of characters in other books or media who face similar profound grief?
7. Of the minor characters Travis mentions throughout the book—some in longer devoted sections, some in less than a sentence—who stood out to you? Why?
8. Why did Reeves choose the mayfly as a recurring symbol? What does it represent?
9. Using the book as evidence, how do you think Reeves conceives of the relationship between life and death? Did *Everything Was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt* inform your own thoughts about this dynamic?

10. How did learning the identity of the very old woman affect your understanding of the book? Were you surprised by the twist?
11. What were your favorite lines or moments from the novel? Did any of them move or inspire you? What feelings did *Everything Was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt* leave you with?
12. What would you do with your twenty-minute gift?



ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Come up with some other books or media about death. What do they have in common with *Everything Was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt*? How is Reeves's novel distinct in content and tone?
2. Choose a minor character—for example, Lucy, Mansoor, or Keith Rotherham—and write a paragraph or two that focuses on them from a close third-person perspective.
3. Cast the *Everything Was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt* movie or miniseries: Choose your top picks for the main roles, and make your case to the larger group.

A CONVERSATION WITH BEN REEVES

How did you come up with the concept for *Everything Was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt*?

Death is something that has always fascinated me. It was clear, even when I was younger, that I dwelt on death much more than most people. But it's always given me a kind of perspective on the world, paying attention to what matters, ignoring the things that don't. And I wanted to explore that in a story. Who better than Death himself?

So I spent a lot of time thinking about who my Death would be. Not the hooded grim reaper, but a gentle and patient man. Someone intimately connected to the world, to nature. Someone who treats his job with the greatest respect, listening to people and comforting them in their final moments. And he'd also be lonely, because it would be so difficult to form close relationships.

From there, it was really a question of, how do I turn this into a story? How can "Death" have a character arc? Well, if he's a solitary person—sorry, Travis, but it's time for you to unwittingly fall in love with the little family across the hall.

What was your day-to-day writing process like?

According to my notes—and I make a lot of notes, almost like a diary, while writing any novel—I came up with the idea on June 1, 2023. Around September, I started writing it in earnest, and by the end of December, it was more or less finished.

That's very quick for me. I think it's because I'd already thought about this subject my whole life. (Plus, it's not the longest book in the world.) I remember writing about 750 words a day, or about 5,000 a week, which soon adds up. I wrote by hand, or on a little Bluetooth typewriter that connects to my phone. Walking to and from work (about forty minutes each way), I'd think about the book, its challenges, the vignettes, and by the time I got home I'd have a pretty solid idea of what I'd write that night.

I tend to edit as I go, because I want it to come out right the first time. That's where the beauty is, for me, that spontaneity. So a lot of what's in the final book is how it originally came out, with a little polish.

One of the most important things for me was holding on to the feeling of the book. I knew what I wanted it to feel like. I'd ramble about it in emails to myself, to try to capture it. I'd write lists of words that summed up the feeling. And I think, in the end, I translated that feeling onto the page.

Between Travis and Dalia, who did you find easiest to write?

Travis was easier to write. He came very naturally to me. Though it took a little while to realize just how connected he is to the world, to everything going on around him. I loved getting deep into his head. That's my happy space. I miss it.

Dalia was more difficult, but not too bad. The challenge with Dalia is that I didn't want her to be too remarkable. She is remarkable, of course, being a single mother with a stressful job—but I wanted her to be a “normal” person. How do you make a normal person interesting? That's where someone like Travis is a perfect fit, because he sees a magic in the ordinary. And he certainly sees it in Dalia.

Who is your favorite minor character? Why?

I have a real soft spot for all of them, and it depends which day you ask me. Recently I've been thinking about “the new kid” who works in the train signal box. He's not named, and we don't see him die. But death comes in many forms, and for me, this scene touches upon the death of childhood. That moment when you've left school, you're working your first real job, and you realize that everything has changed. I remember that being a terrifying time.

You write about the non-human world so beautifully. What is your relationship to nature, and why did it feel important to include nature writing in the novel?

The nature element evolved throughout the writing process. For a while, I didn't know where the book would be set. I thought maybe London, or even New York. But for some reason that felt a little too “fantasy” for this book. So I decided upon a small town/city, and from there I took direct inspiration from where I live—Peterborough.

Peterborough is interesting because it's crumbly and rundown but also bursting with green, and rivers, and allotments, and so on. Perfect for a book about life and death.

It's also very important to me that I experiment in my fiction. I want to try new things, push the boundaries a little bit. And in this book, I wanted to show lots of different points of view—planets colliding, two deer in the woods, a worm, a television. The implication is that there are stories everywhere, but we don't see them, as we go about our daily lives. But Travis sees them. And that was a real joy to play with.

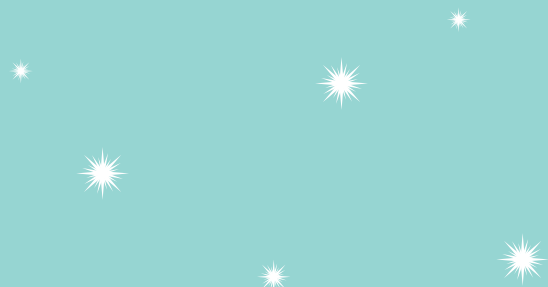
How did you conceptualize Travis's emotions, abilities, and the way he moves about the world?

I knew, very early on, that I never wanted to explain his abilities. For me, that kills it. He is essentially a force of nature, and we rarely see him do anything “magical,” except in the very first scene when he slows time. I decided he should do something unusual in the opening scene, to help establish who he is.

From there, one of Travis's main quirks is how perceptive he is. He seems to be aware of almost everything, everywhere. This allowed me to play with point of view. Even when we read a scene that doesn't involve Travis, it's as if Travis is still there, watching over it.

In terms of his emotions, I loved finding a balance between him caring very deeply, and shutting himself off. You can imagine, as Death, you can't allow the job to overwhelm you. There has to be an emotional distance. At the same time, each and every death is meaningful to him, and he treats each one with the greatest respect.

It's also important for any main character to change. As Travis starts off solitary, it's beautiful to watch him become involved with Dalia and the girls, against his better judgment.



What books or other media influenced your ideas about life and death in general, or energized and encouraged you as you developed *Everything Was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt*?

One book that stands out is *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* by Jon McGregor. I found this book on a hospital seat before my daughter was born. It's set in a small town, and shows lots of different lives of the residents. I recommend it. Also *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers*.

It's always been crucial to me that art is emotional. If it's not emotional, I almost can't see the point. So growing up, my favorite songs and stories tended to be those that make you cry—think *The Land Before Time*, *The Fox and the Hound*, *The Lion King*. Anything that takes you to that special place, where the world feels different, and life feels sharper, and you can cry.

Would you ever return to the world of the novel in a short story or another book? Why or why not?

I hesitate to say never, but probably not. I'm generally not a fan of sequels and so on—I like things to be left alone. Having said that, it'd be fun to see other people's interpretations of Death in their hometowns—different Travises, different locations. It's all one story, and the story lives on.

Is there a scene or sentence in the novel that you especially enjoy?

The one that stays with me is Noah Finch, “a fearless boy.” That scene feels like a distillation of the entire novel. It's quiet, sad, tender, and strangely beautiful and peaceful. I like that Travis reads him a bedtime story.

What do you hope readers take from *Everything Was Beautiful and Nothing Hurt*?

A big theme of the novel, which might not be obvious on a first read, is paying attention. From Travis paying attention to every tiny detail, to the twenty-minute gift—paying attention to the things that truly matter in your life, and paying less attention to the things that don't. Our lives are our attention. We can choose what we do with it. And in a world so full of noise, so full of distraction, and pain, the one thing over which we'll always have control is our attention.

Thank you to everyone for reading.

