

The Half Life DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. At the beginning of the novel, what do you think draws Eileen to Paul? Did your understanding of their relationship change as the story unfolded?
2. What does Eileen gain by becoming part of the Navy community, and what does she lose by belonging to it?
3. How does the Mediterranean landscape of La Maddalena impact the mood of the novel?
4. Throughout the entirety of the story, Eileen is haunted by her brother Lenny's death in combat. How does this grief shape the way she makes choices, both in Charleston and once she arrives on the island?
5. What did you think about Eileen's friendship with Laura? Would they have been friends had the Navy not brought them together? And were there moments when you judged or condemned their differences in character?
6. Discuss the moral choices Eileen faces, both in her public and private life. At what point does knowing the truth create a responsibility to act?
7. What role does language—through Italian lessons, translation, and misunderstandings—play in the novel?
8. Do you think Eileen's attraction to Teo is primarily romantic, political, intellectual, or symbolic of her desire for another life?
9. How do you think Rachel Beanland would define loyalty? Should loyalty belong primarily to a spouse, a community, or a country—or can it fluctuate?
10. The novel raises questions around the roles—wife, mother, Navy spouse—women are expected to play in different spheres. How do these expectations shape the choices available to the women in the novel?
11. Discuss the title *The Half Life*. How does the scientific definition of a "half-life" relate to the novel's bigger ideas surrounding marriage, secrets, grief, and memory?
12. Throughout the novel, Eileen periodically addresses a "you," but the addressee isn't revealed until the epilogue. How does knowing to whom Eileen is writing change how you interpreted the narrative, and what does it add to the novel?