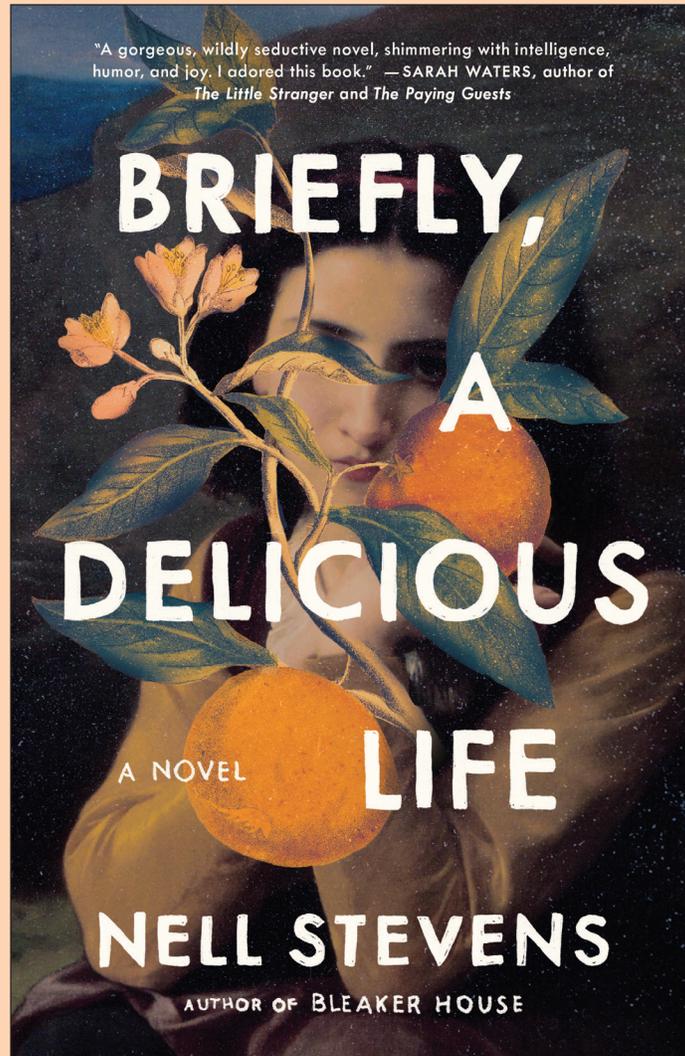


READING GROUP GUIDE



“A gorgeous, wildly seductive novel, shimmering with intelligence, humor and joy. I adored this book.”

—**SARAH WATERS**, author of *The Little Stranger* and *The Paying Guests*

“Here, reader, are the low-lying truths of love, art and time.”

—**SAMANTHA HUNT**, author of *The Unwritten Book* and *The Dark Dark*

“A haunting, dazzling tale of all the good stuff: love, sex, music, literature, death, and what happens after.”

—**MELISSA BRODER**, author of *Milk Fed*

“A luscious, multi-sensory bewitchment of a book.”

—**KIRAN MILLWOOD HARGRAVE**, author of *The Mercies*

BRIEFLY, A DELICIOUS LIFE

NELL STEVENS

This reading group guide for *BRIEFLY, A DELICIOUS LIFE* includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas 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

In 1473, fourteen-year-old Blanca dies in a hilltop monastery in Mallorca. Nearly four hundred years later, when George Sand, her two children, and her lover Frédéric Chopin arrive in the village, Blanca is still there: a spirited, funny, righteous ghost, she's been hanging around the monastery since her accidental death, spying on the monks and the townspeople and keeping track of her descendants.

Blanca is enchanted the moment she sees George, and the magical novel unfolds as a story of deeply felt, unrequited longing—the impossible love of a teenage ghost for a woman who can't see her and doesn't know she exists. As George and Chopin, who wear their unconventionality, in George's case, literally, on their sleeves, find themselves in deepening trouble with the provincial, nineteenth-century villagers, Blanca watches helplessly and reflects on the circumstances of her own death (which involve an ill-advised love affair with a monk-in-training). Charming, original, and surprisingly touching, *Briefly, A Delicious Life* is a powerful story about romantic fixation and a meditation on creativity.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss the author's choice to use real-life historical figures George Sand and Frédéric Chopin. How does this decision change your reading experience? What would differ had the characters been entirely fictional?
2. Blanca's ability to affect the world around her is limited and often depends on the strength of her emotional state. The stronger her feelings, the more impactful her influence. What is the significance of her powers operating this way? What does this say about the importance of one's emotions?
3. Rediscovering sexual desire is a big theme throughout the novel. In what ways do George's and Blanca's first sexual encounters differ from their experiences of queer sexual desire later in life? Consider the difference between the way Blanca describes her actual sexual experiences with Ham and her sexual fantasies with George. What do you make of the difference in intensity of these experiences?
4. Blanca often meditates on the concept of falling in love. She thinks, "George, I came to see, was a person who fell in love easily, and people who fall in love easily are easy to fall in love with" (page 62). Do you agree with this concept? Why or why not?
5. As a ghost, Blanca is able to inhabit others' bodies and experience their sensations, hear their thoughts, witness their dreams and memories, and even see their futures, making her a near-omniscient narrator. Discuss the author's choice to give Blanca these powers. How would the story differ if Blanca's powers were more limited in scope?

6. George and her family clash with the villagers several times throughout the novel. Did you sympathize with one group over the other? What grievances did you feel were justified? Do you think a resolution could have been reached?
7. Though Blanca is attracted to George partly because of the way she dresses, she is still appalled when George goes into the village in a suit. How do the villagers react to the way George presents herself, as opposed to her friends in Paris?
8. The piano, or rather the lack of a proper piano, is a problem for the majority of the novel. What importance does this issue hold for the different characters? How does this add to the tension in the characters' relationships, and what does the piano represent for each of them?
9. George often finds the demands of motherhood to be at odds with her writing career and ambitions. How do you think this affected her and her children? Discuss the difference between her relationships with Maurice and Solange and how those relationships change over the course of the novel.
10. As things grow more difficult in Mallorca, George becomes exhausted. She wonders, "What am I to make of life?" reminding Blanca of her own struggle to rationalize her existence after death. How does each character make sense of these existential questions?
11. Eventually, the reader learns that Blanca is not bound to Mallorca, despite having died there and remained there, as a ghost, for hundreds of years. If you were in her shoes, what would you have done? What did you make of Blanca's decision at the end of the novel?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Look again at the chapters titled after Chopin's compositions: "Prelude No. 11 in B Major, Vivace," "Prelude No. 4 in E Minor, Largo," "Prelude No. 9 in E Major, Largo," etc. Find and play these pieces while you discuss the novel.
2. Read George Sand's autobiographical novel *A Winter in Majorca*, which recounts the details of her trip with Chopin and her two children. How does she describe Mallorca? What do you make of Stevens's adaptation of Sand's experiences?
3. Read Nell Stevens's two earlier works of nonfiction: *Bleaker House* and *The Victorian and the Romantic*. To learn more about the author, go to her website, www.nellstevens.com.

