

STEPHEN  
KING



FAIRY TALE  
A NOVEL

READING  
GROUP GUIDE

*This reading group guide for **Fairy Tale** includes an introduction, discussion questions, and 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

Charlie Reade looks like a regular high school kid, great at baseball and football, a decent student. When Charlie is seventeen, he meets a dog named Radar and her aging master, Howard Bowditch, a recluse in a big house at the top of a big hill, with a locked shed in the backyard. Sometimes strange sounds emerge from it. King's storytelling in *Fairy Tale* soars. This is a magnificent and terrifying tale in which good is pitted against overwhelming evil, and a heroic boy—and his dog—must lead the battle.

Early in the pandemic, King asked himself: "What could you write that would make you happy?"

"As if my imagination had been waiting for the question to be asked, I saw a vast deserted city—deserted but alive. I saw the empty streets, the haunted buildings, a gargoyle head lying overturned in the street. I saw smashed statues (of what I didn't know, but I eventually found out). I saw a huge, sprawling palace with glass towers so high their tips pierced the clouds. Those images released the story I wanted to tell."

## TOPICS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

**1** What do you think of King's decision to begin the opening of this book with the death of Charlie's mother on the "goddamn bridge" and his father's battle with alcoholism? How does this influence Charlie's childhood and teenage years?

**2** What do you think about Charlie's voice and retrospective point of view? Some of his lingo and phrases speak to older generations, ones that a teenager from the 2010s wouldn't necessarily say. How does this characterization later play out in the novel and what effect does it have for you as a reader?

**3** Charlie's dad suffered from alcoholism and recovered through Charlie's help, AA, and a supportive network of friends. How does Charlie's relationship and healing with his father counter with his relationship with Mr. Bowditch?

**4** Describe Charlie's relationship with Mr. Bowditch. Besides being at the right place and time to save him after his fall, why does Charlie stick around to be with Mr. Bowditch and Radar? How does Charlie's family history play a role in his decision to be their caretaker?

**5** Radar is first described as a mean, frightening dog by Charlie's friend Andy Chen. Yet, when Charlie meets him, he's a much more subdued and trusting dog in old age. Why is that and how does Radar help Charlie's quest into Empis?

**6** Mr. Bowditch says to Charlie, "A brave man helps. A coward just gives presents" (page 43). What does this mean to you and why is this quote frequently referenced in the novel?

**7** Who is the "ha-ha" man whom Charlie calls Rumpelstiltskin, what is he after, and why is Charlie suspicious of him? What theme or symbol does he represent in the greater story?

**8** The first half of the story sets up Charlie's family, Mr. Bowditch and his injury, Radar, and the gold in Mr. Bowditch's safe (among other events) before we enter Empis. Why does the author take longer to set up Charlie's normal world instead of entering straight into the magical one? In your opinion, does this setup help or hinder the story?

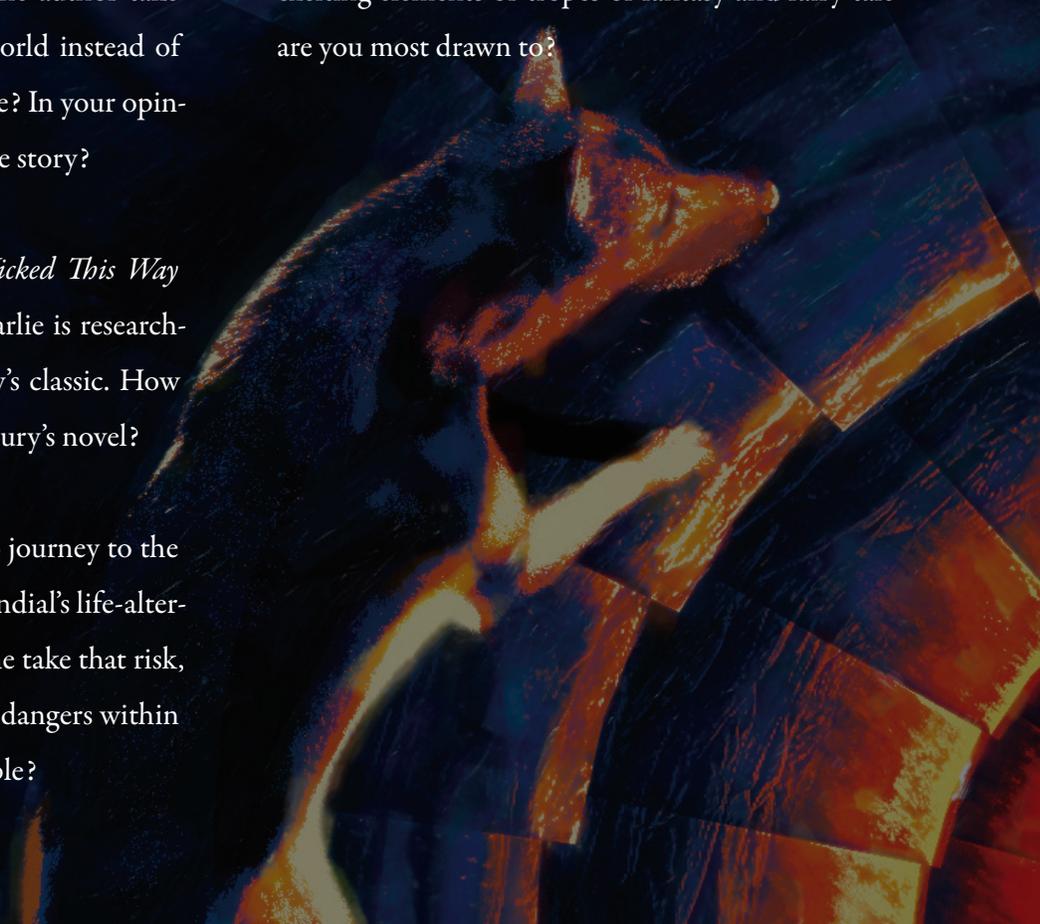
**9** Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes* is referenced when Charlie is researching this other world. Read Bradbury's classic. How does *Fairy Tale* pay homage to Bradbury's novel?

**10** Charlie travels to Empis to journey to the magical city and use the sundial's life-altering effects to save Radar. Why does he take that risk, knowing Mr. Bowditch's history, the dangers within this world, and after meeting its people?

**11** Portals into secondary worlds play a key role throughout the novel. Mr. Bowditch did his utmost to keep the well away from the eyes of people who could exploit this other world. Compare the deep well and cavern into Empis with other portal fantasies. How does the author expand the portal fantasy genre, and how is this book similar? What are you hoping to see more of in this fantasy genre?

**12** By the end of the novel, how has Charlie grown as a person? Why does he feel the need to tell this story to the reader, and how does he use his experience to grow personally and professionally?

**13** In writing *Fairy Tale*, Stephen King asked himself a question: "What could you write that would make you happy?" What are some of the happiest and most fun moments in this story? What exciting elements or tropes of fantasy and fairy tale are you most drawn to?



## ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1 Think back to King's previous books starring children and teenagers in the primary roles: *Stand by Me*, *The Institute*, *It*, and others. How does Charlie differ from King's previous children and teenage lead characters and how is he similar?

2 Read *The Gunslinger*, the first book in King's Dark Tower series. Discuss the world-building parallels between both books.

3 Think about the fairy tales in your life growing up and choose one or two characters from that work (or different works) and put them in the world of Stephen King's *Fairy Tale*. How would they help or hinder Charlie's journey to reach the sundial and save Empis.

