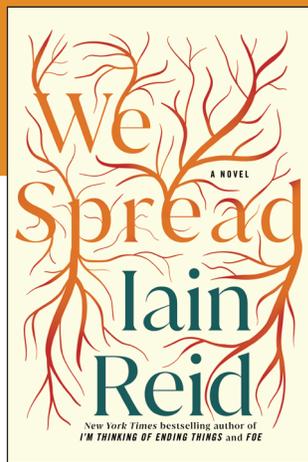


READING GROUP GUIDE



This reading group guide for *We Spread* 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

Penny, an artist, has lived in the same apartment for decades, surrounded by the artifacts and keepsakes of her long life. She is resigned to the mundane rituals of old age, until things start to slip. Before her longtime partner passed away years earlier, provisions were made, unbeknownst to her, for a room in a unique long-term care residence, where Penny finds herself after one too many “incidents.”

Initially, surrounded by peers, conversing, eating, sleeping, looking out at the beautiful woods that surround the house, all is well. She even begins to paint again. But as the days start to blur together, Penny—with a growing sense of unrest and distrust—starts to lose her grip on the passage of time and on her place in the world. Is she succumbing to the subtly destructive effects of aging, or is she an unknowing participant in something more unsettling?

At once compassionate and uncanny, and told in spare, hypnotic prose, Iain Reid’s genre-defying third novel explores questions of conformity, art, productivity, relationships, and what, ultimately, it means to grow old.



TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The format of a novel can greatly influence a reader's experience. How does the format of *We Spread*—short, spaced-out paragraphs—contribute to the story and overall tone of the book?
2. Early in the book we learn of Penny's love for surrealism. First, discuss what surrealism is. Then, what do you think was the most surreal scene in this book? Discuss other surreal moments of this book (i.e. Penny finding her own funeral program).
3. Penny is fascinated with the concept of “horizontal transfer of genes.” When we first encountered them at the beginning, how did you think her two handwritten notes (“horizontal transfer of genes” and “pursuit of life at all costs”) correlated? Did that change by the end the book?
4. Discuss how Penny experiences time throughout the novel—days turn to years, years to days, hours to months. Time for her isn't linear, but more fluid and erratic. How did this contribute to Penny's disorientation? Discuss any other influencing factors that may have caused the characters' confusion (i.e. not being allowed outside for an unknown amount of time).
5. Penny is fixated on the idea that her work is always in-progress and never really finished. Why do you think she feels this way? Is a piece of art ever really finished if we, as people, are always changing? In regard to Penny's unfinished portraits in particular, does this suggest that we can never fully know someone or ourselves? How might Penny's feelings of unfinishedness relate to how she feels about her life, in retrospect?
6. The director of Six Cedars, Shelley, wants to appear as having the residents' best interests at heart. However, she discourages close relationships between the residents and also discourages Penny from pursuing her passion for painting, which is why Penny doesn't want her to know when she has started painting again. Why do you think the other residents are allowed to pursue their passions—Pete plays his violin, Ruth studies language, Hilbert reads about mathematics? Why do you think Shelley tries so hard to keep the residents apart other than at mealtimes? And why do you think she collects their hair and nail clippings?
7. From the very beginning we watch Penny, and the other residents, slowly lose autonomy, or have it taken away from them. Discuss some of the things she loses and how she tries to resist. For example, Shelley cuts Penny's hair without asking how she would like it shaped; the residents are told when to eat, nap, bathe, and so on. Does this transfer of decision-making (and loss of autonomy) to another person contribute to Penny's mounting confusion and changing perception of reality? When most important decisions are being made for you—might it be difficult, impossible even, to even know what you want anymore?

- 
8. Shelley often wears gloves when interacting with the residents, adding the feeling of “otherness” to their dynamics. Why do you think she always wears them? Does this represent her feelings toward old age—or perhaps it reflects how our culture feels about the elderly—not wanting to be tainted by it? Or could it be even more sinister?
 9. There are multiple allusions to Penny’s time with her partner throughout the book, hinting he may have been self-absorbed and controlling. Penny learns that her partner arranged for her to live at Six Cedars without her knowledge. How does this contribute to her loss of autonomy and general disorientation? Discuss the fine line between care and control here—where is the border? Is there always a difference?
 10. The trees outside of the facility are a constant presence and there is imagery of nature and trees throughout the novel. What functions do you think their presence serves? And why do you think Shelley hasn’t let any of the residents go outside?
 11. Discuss the scene in Penny’s room, when she begins to hear the buzzing, followed by a multitude of voices (p. 191). How did it make you feel reading it? Have someone from your group read this passage aloud. How does it make you feel hearing it aloud?
 12. Rather than losing their appetite, the residents of Six Cedars become increasingly hungry and begin to eat more, but they lose weight. What do you think is going on here? Is this part of the process of losing themselves and becoming one? How does this tie into the overall theme of loss of identity and autonomy as we age?
 13. Manipulation is a common occurrence throughout the book—whether it’s Shelley telling Jack he will never be able to find another job if he leaves or the questionable behavior of Penny’s partner in her reminiscences of him. Discuss the different ways in which people should practice identifying manipulative behaviors and how they can resist them.
 14. When reflecting on the aging process, Penny says to Hilbert, “As passions decrease, character is revealed.” What do you think she means by this? Do you think this is true?
 15. Discuss the title *We Spread*. What did you think about it before reading the novel? Did this change after you read it? What imagery does it evoke for you?



ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. As a group, discuss your experiences with elderly relatives or friends. Do you have any experience dealing with assisted living facilities? If there is one in close proximity to where you live, would you consider volunteering there?
2. Think about how our culture treats its elderly citizens. How do (or don't) we ensure that they are cared for at end of life? Do you have any experience with the elderly care in another culture? If so, share with the group. Do some research about how elderly citizens in other countries are cared for. Are there any other systems that could serve as a model for how you would like your home country to treat the elderly? Discuss how can we improve upon geriatric care here.
3. Is there something you've always wanted to do but might have been too afraid/nervous/etc.? Think about something you might regret not having tried when you are older and make a plan to try it—perhaps with someone from your book club!
4. End of life care and funeral planning is still a very taboo subject in many cultures. Have you given any thought to your own funeral? How would you want it to go? How do you want to be remembered?