

## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR *TOUCHED BY FATALITY*

1. *Touched by Fatality* is written from the perspective of a single narrator in the present tense. Why do you think the author chose this?
2. Caitlin has relied on a sense of certainty and is quick to form judgments. What events lead her to conclude, “You just never know” and to realize that people and circumstances may be different from what they seem? When have you been wrong?
3. Claire asks Caitlin if she believes that things happen for a reason. How would you answer this for yourself?
4. Peter and Rick raise the question of reality versus insanity. Do you believe these are absolutes? Where would you rate yourself on the HESS scale?
5. Caitlin, Claire, Philip, and Alex struggle with their relationship with those who have died and how their identity has been changed. Whom have you lost and how has that affected your sense of Self?
6. Caitlin acknowledges that her looks, intellect, wealth, widowhood, and connection to a famous person set her apart from others. If, as Rick maintains, vulnerability is an essential element in establishing intimacy, is Caitlin justified in feeling that these privileges are barriers? Has envy ever inhibited your relationship with another?
7. Caitlin wonders, What is a good death? How would you answer this for those in the book—Jeff, Hank, Lara, Rick, and Lee—and for those in your life who have passed away? What would you choose as your ideal death?

8. For those who are taking the “slow road to death,” the book raises the question of how they are cared for—at home with family or caregivers, assisted living, nursing homes. Which of these options would you prefer? Robbie and Ian are younger, disabled individuals. How would you rate their quality of life and that of their caregivers? How has their condition affected their caregivers?
9. Hank bargains for more time. Rick elects hospice and VSED. Loretta would seek a cure for Robbie at any cost. What are your views on “not giving up”? What circumstances would affect your answer?
10. Caitlin is initially uncomfortable about serving as a witness during the dying process. Did this surprise you? Have you companioned someone on a death journey, and, if so, how did it impact your acceptance of their death and fear of your own?
11. The book explores the themes of fatality, resilience, and transcendence. If death is our inevitable fate, is Peter’s definition of fatality pessimistic? Are you a resilient person? What events or people have caused you to experience transcendence?
12. Jeff, Sam, and Caitlin are challenged by ethical dilemmas relating to the survival of Protogen. In their place, how would you resolve them? What other instances of ethical choices were faced in the book? Are lies ever warranted?
13. Setting aside Sam’s ethical choice in hiding the real cause of Jeff’s death, do you have an advance directive or POLST (Physician Orders for Life Sustaining Treatment)?
14. Millie says, “The living wear masks.” What “masks” are maintained by the characters in the book? What barriers have you encountered to authenticity?

15. Connections with Caitlin's parents, Peter, Millie, and Rick sustained her in the immediate aftermath of Jeff's death. How did Freddy, Loretta, Robbie, Dan, Philip, and Claire contribute to her resilience and recovery? Did Caitlin's decision to move and change professions accelerate or retard processing her grief?
16. Caitlin says, "Deaths aren't the only losses we grieve." Who or what have you grieved and what has sustained you? Of loss, Peter says, "It's the common denominator we share." Rick advocates that we "mine the sorrows." What have you learned or gained from loss?
17. Caitlin discovers the healing power of touch, both as a giver and recipient. How does the American relationship with touch differ from that of other cultures?
18. Phillip says, "There are no bit players." Which character most influences the arc of the story? Who are some of the "bit players" in your life?
19. Caitlin concludes, "Private wounds shouldn't be public fodder." Where would you draw a line with regard to media coverage of personal tragedies?
20. Caitlin and Freddy struggle with forgiveness. In general, do you tend to hold grudges?
21. Aikido trains one to harmonize with the energy of the attacker. How does Caitlin's processing of the assault of Jeff's death reflect or diverge from the philosophy of Aikido and the value she places on resilience? Do you resist or accept the unavoidable in your life?
22. Do you agree that regret is the one of the "saddest words in the English language"? To what extent do you engage in What Ifs and If Onlys?

23. Loretta and Caitlin discuss the relationship between vulnerability and intimacy in the context of sex. In what ways do psychotherapy, massage, Aikido, hospice, and dance share these same elements? With whom have you been most intimate and what is the conduit you utilized to attain that depth of connection?