

## Reading Group Guide

*This reading group guide for **What Comes Next and How to Like It** 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

Written in a series of brief, poetic chapters, *What Comes Next and How to Like It* is Abigail Thomas's extraordinary examination of her life today—often solitary, yet still rich and engaging, filled with art, writing, children, grandchildren, dogs, a few suitors, and her longtime best friend.

### Topics and Questions for Discussion

1. Elizabeth Gilbert said of Abigail's memoirs, "I come to her books as though to a feast, and leave fulfilled and transformed." Did you feel transformed after reading *What Comes Next and How to Like It*? If so, in what ways?
2. This memoir is organized into four parts and many short "chapters." Discuss the book's structure. What purpose do you think it serves?
3. The second chapter, "Write a Book," focuses on a discussion Abigail and Chuck have in which Chuck asks Abigail to write their story. How does this conversation affect Abigail's telling of that story?
4. Abigail often finds herself painting, particularly landscape scenes on sheets of glass. How does she approach painting and writing differently? What does painting offer her that writing doesn't?
5. Abigail's feelings about Chuck and Catherine's relationship change over the course of the book. How did their affair alter Abigail's bonds with each of them?
6. Discuss Abigail's relationships with the men in her life—her husband, her son, and Chuck. How do these relationships differ from her relationships with women—in particular, her three daughters?
7. It is no secret to readers of Abigail Thomas's work that her dogs are important to her. Discuss her connection to her dogs; in what ways is it similar to the relationships she has with her human companions, and in what ways is it different?
8. Part III, "The Wilderness of Not Knowing," focuses on Catherine's battle with cancer. What does the experience teach Abigail? How does it change her?

9. At times, Abigail worries she is an alcoholic; other times, she enjoys three Manhattans before dinner without concern. Discuss Abigail's relationship with alcohol and how it affects her moods, decisions, and perspectives.

10. In Part II, "I Don't Get to Live Forever," Abigail ponders the meaning of death and struggles to accept it as the inevitability it is. Consider the following passages and discuss their relevance to Abigail's experience:

A) "This is uncomfortably real. I'm just poking at death with a long stick to see what happens." (p. 102)

B) "This body of mine, the one in pink pajamas, the one hanging on to her pillow for dear life, these pleasant accommodations in which I have made my home for seventy years, it's going to die. It will die, and the rest of me, homeless, will disappear into thin air." (p. 114)

C) "I want to make Death a member of my family. I don't want it to arrive as a stranger." (p. 120)

11. Reread the final chapter, "Love." What do you think Abigail means by her poignant last words? How do you interpret what she is trying to say about relationships, or about love in general?

12. Different moments in the book strike very different notes—of sadness and despair, joy and relief, love and fear. Ultimately, how would you describe *What Comes Next and How to Like It*? What feeling did the memoir leave you with?

### **Enhance Your Book Club**

1. Abigail Thomas's writing is widely praised for being filled with memorable, lyrical sentences. Before your book club meeting, ask the members of your reading group to select their favorite passage or passages from the book. When you meet, share your selections and discuss why you chose the lines you did. What about them did you find particularly meaningful?

2. Abigail details an exercise she asks her writing students to complete: "Take any ten years of your life, reduce them to two pages, and every sentence has to be three words long" (p. 36). Try this exercise with your book club. Ask for volunteers to share their writing with the group.

3. Painting is a pastime that brings Abigail joy. View her paintings here:  
<http://www.abigailthomas.net/paintings/>.

4. To explore more of Abigail's work, visit her blog at  
<http://www.abigailthomas.net/blog/> or read one of her other memoirs: *A Three Dog Life*,

a meditation on her relationship with her husband, Rich, after a tragic accident; and *Safekeeping*, in which she explores four pivotal moments that have shaped her life.