

## Reading Group Guide

*This reading group guide for **The Undertaker's Daughter** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author **Kate Mayfield**. 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

*The Undertaker's Daughter* offers a child's account of the business of death. Kate grew up in a funeral home in southern Kentucky during the turbulent 1960s. Her father, the charismatic Beau Brummel of morticians, splashed onto Jubilee's segregated community as one of its two white undertakers. A philanderer and a secret alcoholic in a small, God-fearing community, he opened the door of their funeral home to family feuds, fetishes, and victims of accidents, murder, and suicide. The living and the dead entered their house like a vapor, in ways that only the South can conjure. They were a community peppered with flawed characters who learned there are no secrets in a small town, except the ones with which we are buried. This stirring memoir reveals Kate's extensive research into her father's life and his time serving in Europe during World War II, including her discovery as to the touching reasons her father chose to become an undertaker.

### Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. In what way does the prologue story of the bridge game set the tone for the book? What themes are foreshadowed here? Discuss specific examples and how they relate to later scenes.
2. On page 14, Kate contrasts her father's appearance and comportment with the stereotypical view of "mortician" or "undertaker." What images do those words conjure up for you? Did Kate's father live up to your expectations? Why or why not? Can you imagine yourself in that profession?
3. Discuss Kate's descriptions of her father's reverence for death, the dead, and the paraphernalia of death. When did this reverence cross the line to affect his family? In what ways was Frank both selfless and selfish in the sacrifices he made for his business?
4. On page 24, Kate describes a typical family dinner, at which she was admonished not to talk about death at the table, even as her parents "spoke of nothing else." How was death a taboo in Kate's family, even as it permeated all aspects of their lives? What other taboos were there among the Mayfields and in the town of Jubilee? What are Kate's contributions to these secrets, and how do they later lead her to feel as if she is "two people" (page 249)? Are there any ways in which you similarly lead a secret life?
5. Kate experiences funerals from evolving vantage points as she grows up, beginning

with her secret perch on the stairs, and later as the organist. Describe the things Kate notices most at different points in her life. What details stand out to you from funerals you've attended? What is the main reason Kate agrees to fill in as the organist?

6. Much of what Kate knows about her father's secrets she learns from family members, friends, and, later, historical records. Why doesn't Kate simply ask her father these questions? What is the reason Kate eventually learns her father chose his profession? What other events impacted his choice?

7. Kate had several hiding places while growing up. Describe these getaways. What was the most unusual, and why was that her favorite? Share your own secret getaways as a child and why they were important to you.

8. Kate describes only one close childhood friend, a girl named Jo who moves in two doors down from the Mayfield funeral home one summer during their early teens. Why are she and Jo drawn to each other? How is Jo different from other girls in town? What deeper secrets do we later learn Kate and Jo share? Why does Kate feel she is closer to Jo than to her own siblings?

9. How does the "business of death" (page 43) differ from how we experience death as mourners? How is this underscored by Frank's description of the different views people have on selecting a casket? How is money sometimes just as much a taboo as death?

10. Frank spends "thirteen years toing and froing" (page 94) Miss Agnes around town, taking her meals on holidays, and seeking her counsel. What effect does this relationship have on the Mayfield family? Why does Lily Tate agree to their arrangement? How does Miss Agnes help Frank's business, particularly concerning the Old Clan? Why do you think Miss Agnes chose to develop a special relationship with Kate, out of all the Mayfield children?

11. Kate weaves stories of the lives and deaths of the townspeople of Jubilee into her memoir. How do these stories contribute to the flow of the book and our understanding of Kate's experiences with death? Which one evoked the strongest feelings for you? Choose your favorite of these stories and share the reasons why with your group.

12. The strong reaction to desegregation displayed by adults in her life was incomprehensible to young Kate. Discuss the differences between how blacks and whites in Jubilee lived, died, and grieved. What were the consequences of the intersection of these two worlds? Identify some of the ways that both Frank and Kate cross over this line.

13. Kate first feels the contrast between the smallness of Jubilee and the "great expanse of America" (page 175) during a family trip to the beach. How does Kate's desire for the freedom of a larger world manifest? Revisit the afternoon where Kate and Jo discover the musician Charles Mingus (page 209). How does this experience solidify Kate's idea that she might visit or even live in a place far different from Jubilee?

14. On page 274, Kate calls the funeral business “the most segregated business in Jubilee and in the whole of the South.” Do you agree with this claim? Why or why not? Identify other social institutions that Kate observes as heavily segregated in Jubilee during her time there.

### **Enhance Your Book Club**

1. Kate notes that many of the people of Jubilee are uncomfortable with the idea of children living in a funeral home, and expects that there will always be someone who finds that “distasteful . . . creepy, even abhorrent” (page 244). Would her family’s arrangement be considered unusual today? Interview a local undertaker and ask his or her opinion. How did he or she get into the business? Is the term “undertaker” still used? Ask these and any other questions the memoir prompts for you, and then share the details of your conversation with your book club.

2. Consider the dynamics of the Mayfield family and of Jubilee from the perspective of another of Kate’s siblings. Using examples from the book, share with your group how you think this sibling may have experienced specific events.

3. People are frequently more comfortable talking about death in general than the reality of their own eventual deaths. Do you view death any differently after reading this book? If so, how? Consider how you would like your own funeral to look. How does thinking about that make you feel? If you feel comfortable, share your vision of your funeral with your book club.

4. Kate speaks with her father about what happens to bodies after death and discusses the influence of her Christian upbringing (p 231–33) on her beliefs at the time. Choose a non-Christian religious practice and research the beliefs and rituals surrounding death in that tradition. Share your findings with the group, comparing and contrasting those with Kate’s father’s, and with your own beliefs and their foundation.

5. The television show *Six Feet Under* follows a family of brothers who run their father’s funeral business after his death. Choose three episodes of this show to watch with your book club, then compare and contrast the show with Kate’s memoir. What similarities and differences are there between this book and the show in terms of how the business of death is portrayed?

### **A Conversation with Kate Mayfield**

**This book is a departure from your previous two books, which were much lighter reading. Why did you decide to write your memoir? What was the most challenging aspect? What do you hope readers take away from your story?**

I began preliminary research for *The Undertaker's Daughter* before I cowrote my second book, so I’ve been thinking about it for a long time, weighing whether or not I had a

unique story to tell, but also a story which carried universal themes.

Odd though it may sound, one of the most challenging aspects in writing this book was that I felt too close to the material. I changed most of the names, and even the place names, to help me gain much needed distance.

More than anything, it is my hope that readers will be entertained and swept away in a time capsule by a story that is set in a very specific place—a funeral home in the South—in a unique time in America’s history.

**The deaths you write about are natural, with the exception of the Sheridan family and Linda Mayberry. Are there ways in which, as much as you were exposed to death, small town life also isolated you from it?**

I can’t recall a time when I’ve ever felt isolated from death.

**Though you give detailed treatment to your father’s care in embalming the dead, cremation is never mentioned. What was the general view on cremation during your father’s tenure as an undertaker? Was this a function of the culture of the South, or the era?**

Cremation was not performed at that time in our town, and I’m not sure it is now. As a child I didn’t even know of its existence. Some ancient cultures consider cremation cleansing and holy. That was not the case in the South, in the eras in my book. Before people conformed to the idea, it was considered a violent thief of the lasting, peaceful image that people sought. Major adjustments in the culture’s thinking regarding cremation were needed before it finally crept up on the South’s psyche and became more acceptable.

**On page 237, you note that people have long chosen to “incur debt rather than forgo their idea of a good death.” What is your idea of a good death? What role, if any, does the dying process play? How do you imagine your own funeral?**

I preface my answer with a reminder that I’m not a death expert or a bereavement counselor; I’m a writer who happens to have had a great deal of experience surrounding death. As much as modern society seeks to cushion against an agonizing, untimely, or tragic death, unless the person is very old, or in a great deal of pain, people don’t generally want to die. How can you have a good death when you don’t want to die? Hospices, the aforementioned counselors and others help to create a *better* death, a more *comfortable* death, but I’m not convinced that there are good deaths. Perhaps the efforts to create good deaths are more for the benefit of the surviving family members and friends. I anticipate uproar as people rise to debate this!

**You intersperse stories of your family with brief vignettes of the funerals of particular people in Jubilee. Which of these was the most memorable or poignant for you? Were there any others about which you couldn’t bring yourself to write? If**

**so, why?**

I can still see Linda Mayberry's dead face as clearly as if it were yesterday. Her death image is the definition of haunting.

I challenged myself not to shrink from the most difficult funerals and deaths, so I've written about them with as much detail and honesty as I could muster. It wasn't easy, but I didn't expect it to be.

**You write in vivid detail about the sometimes violent encounters between your older sister, Evelyn, and yourself and your younger sister, Jemma. How have your relationships with your siblings and your mother evolved since your father's death and your move overseas?**

When a patriarch is the first in the family to die, usually one of two things happens: the family is drawn closer, or the family splinters. Though I was the only sibling to leave the state and then the country, I felt that each of us trod our own paths after my father's death. We've lived in waves of closeness since, moving in and out of each other's lives depending on circumstances.

**On pages 42--44, you tell the story about the first time you sensed a presence in the room with a body. Is this something you still experience? What do you believe about the afterlife?**

A few years ago I visited a funeral home in Kentucky, not as a mourner, and I accidentally stumbled into a kind of waiting room where a body was laid out in a casket, ready to be moved to the chapel for visitation. I was alone with the deceased and much to my surprise I experienced that same feeling that had scared me in my childhood. I can't explain it. I don't seek out these experiences as I once did. It just happened.

I have no belief in the afterlife whatsoever—I can't prove it exists and I can't prove it doesn't.

**You heard various stories about your father's war injury from various sources. Before reviewing his medical records, which version held the most credence for you? Do you regret not asking more questions of your father growing up? If Frank Mayfield were alive today, what questions would you ask him?**

The version my father told me of having been shot while guarding a building conjured the clearest, simplest explanation. I could image it more easily than the ride in a jeep during which an arrested enemy soldier grabbed his gun. That version sounded too much like Hollywood.

It is more difficult than you might imagine to sit at the bedside of a dying parent while each of you attempt to disclose your secrets, your innermost thoughts, your regrets, or even an expression of love. Again, it's a great scene for a novel or film, but it rarely

happens in real life. Perhaps more people are choosing to tie up loose ends and heal old wounds now, I don't know. I didn't because my father was very ill and in great pain. My younger sister's and my entire thrust at the end of his life was to help him feel more comfortable, not to ask him questions.

Even though I was quite inquisitive of my father when I was younger, I wish I'd not accepted silence for an answer. I wish I could have found a way to talk to him about his experiences in the war without hurting him in the process. I'd like to know what he and Miss Agnes talked about all those years and what, exactly, made their friendship so strong and unique. I'd like to hear him articulate what drove him. My mother shared with me her experience of being married to him, for which I'm grateful, but I would also like to know if later, in his short life, he had any regrets about how hurtful he had been. I would ask him what dreams he had for his future life, the life he might have had before he became a boy soldier, the point at which his life changed forever.

**You describe in the epilogue Miss Agnes's "donation" of her house to the public, and your most recent return to Jubilee, including a walk through your childhood home. How do you look back on Jubilee now?**

The axiom that all small towns are the same drives me quite mad. I don't think that's true. Jubilee was particularly insular at that time, which breeds its own unique small town idiosyncrasies.

Other than the time I've spent writing this book, I don't think about Jubilee.

**Two stories stand out in particular about how your sense of your own mortality changed rapidly: a delivery to the funeral home of miniature coffins, and the death of Linda Mayberry. In retrospect, do you agree with your parents' decision not to hide death of any kind from you and your siblings? How do you believe children should be introduced to the idea of death?**

It would have been futile for our parents to try to hide death from us. Death was in our home, in our lives twenty-four hours a day. It would have been difficult to enforce a rule that downstairs was off-limits, not impossible, but difficult. Pandora's box . . .

I don't have children and I'm not a teacher, so I wouldn't presume to offer advice on how to introduce them to the idea of death. It's not too hard to understand the dying process; it's black and white, from antemortem, to perimortem, to postmortem. What happens next is the complicated part of their education. I would hazard a guess that the explanation partially depends on the family's religious beliefs, if they have any.

**On the final page, you note the recent "surge in people who seek to demystify the subject of death and its history and rituals" (page 348). Discuss your participation in the Death Movement. What impact do you feel this movement has on the culture of death?**

I have one foot in, one foot out of the Death Movement. My interests lie in historical practices, the inclusion and romanticization of death in literature, and the tantalizing search for immortality.

Here in Britain, people are much less comfortable talking about death, especially their own, than they are in the States. People are living longer, and because of that many haven't seen a dead body until they've reached their thirties. Compared to Victorian times when the population was dying in large numbers from cradle to mid-age, that's shockingly late in life to witness a first death. There is an entire spectrum of attitudes toward death today; people are both fascinated and frightened by it, and for many it represents something macabre and even unclean; for others it is a forbidden subject. In some parts of the world today there are people living with the dead, either in their homes, or in cemeteries, such as the tombs of residences in the City of the Dead in Cairo.

The Death Salons and Death Cafés I've attended have been incredibly respectful, informative, and revealing. Many people leave cheerful and unburdened. It's not a party; those attending who have little time left keep things appropriately sober. I think this movement will grow as the number of elderly in our population increases.