

Book Club Kit



A Letter from the Author

Hello Book Clubs!

Isn't reading together one of life's true joys? I am thrilled to know that you have chosen *Other People's Words* and only wish that I could eavesdrop on your discussion. I know I would learn a lot and be deeply moved by the connections you make from my story to yours.

A group of friends and I formed a club in the nineties that we called "Bookalicious," and I confess to remembering more about our freewheeling conversations than the books we'd gathered to read. Almost two decades later, a handful of us redubbed ourselves "Writealicious" and planned a DIY retreat in the New Mexico desert, at a house with a library and hot tub. Looking back, I'm realizing that this trip was a turning point when I first allowed myself to believe that *Other People's Words* might really happen. So, you never know what magic a book club will create.

I hope that my story of friendship as a great love will invite you to reflect on relationships in your own lives that have defined you in ways that the world might not always recognize. I hope that the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin's simple observation—that our speech is "filled to overflowing with other people's words"—is as transformative for you as it has been for me. I hope that one of these days, you'll notice a phrase or even just an inflection in your voice that brings to mind a person you love, and that the experience will feel like a visit that sustains you.

Here's to the inexhaustible beauty and power of words among friends.

All the best,

Lissa Joep

Behind the Scenes Photos



Bookalicious Writealicious Retreat



Emily and Lissa



Chas, Emily and Jonnie



Christine



Mercy

Recipes

CHAS'S MARGARITAS

Ingredients

- ⅓ tequila, any kind you like
- ⅓ Cointreau
- ⅓ FRESH SQUEEZED lime juice

Serve over ice in a salt-rimmed glass

RAINBOW SALAD

Ingredients

- Arugula
- Pomegranate seeds
- Carrot ribbons
- Shredded raw beets
- Purple cabbage
- Chopped pistachios
- Grated pecorino

Dressing: tons of lemon, olive oil, minced garlic, salt and pepper, shichimi togarashi spice mix

Other People's Words Playlist

Curated by Lissa Soep

1. ***Sometimes It Snows in April***, Meshell Ndegeocello, Ventriloquism (covering Prince, resonant with Bakhtin)
2. ***Body and Soul***, Amy Winehouse and Tony Bennett (blending two voices, including one—Amy—that Jonnie especially loved)
3. ***What a Wonderful World***, k.d. lang and Tony Bennett (blending two voices, including one—k.d.—that Mercy and Christine especially loved)
4. ***Across the Great Divide***, Nanci Griffith (played live by Christine's student at the memorial at school)
5. ***If I Had a Boat***, Lyle Lovett (played live by Christine's student, John Forté from The Fugees, around a bonfire at Mercy's house after the memorial)
6. ***If I Had a Boat***, Karen Elson (double-voicing Lovett's song)
7. ***Angel from Montgomery***, Bonnie Raitt (covering John Prine, her great friend—a song with a first line that makes me think of Mercy and Emily because we met when we were so young and we're not anymore, and because we've all learned in our own ways that it's lucky to get to grow old)
8. ***Love and Affection***, Joan Armatrading (iconic song I've loved forever, with lyrics that are in a kind of tension with the themes of friendship I take up in *Other People's Words*)
9. ***MTA***, Kingston Trio (which Jonnie would sing to his kids at bedtime)
10. ***Farewell Reel***, Patti Smith (played live at Jonnie's memorial service, and Patti Smith's *Just Kids*—a story of friendship, loss, and poetry—is a book that I read a million times when I was writing *Other People's Words*)
11. ***Duppy Conquerer***, Bob Marley (a song that makes Chas think of Jonnie — "yes, mi friend, mi friend.")
12. ***Talkin' Bout a Revolution***, Tracy Chapman (which both Jonnie and Christine were often doing)
13. ***Gloria***, Laura Branigan (reminds me of the ice-skating scene in *Flashdance* and inspires me not to give up when I'm feeling blocked or demoralized)
14. ***I Wish***, Skee-Lo (even though I don't actually wish I was a little bit taller)
15. ***Sometime***, Sweet Honey in the Rock (which I saw performed live in Boston in the nineties, when the inimitable Bernice Johnson Reagon sang it without a mic and absolutely flooded the hall with her extraordinary voice)
16. ***It's Not Just Me, It's Everybody***, Weyes Blood ("I can't pretend that we always keep what we find")



Listen on Spotify by scanning the code to the right with your mobile device.



Discussion Questions

- 1.** Powerful friendships are at the heart of *Other People's Words*. Do you have friendships that sustain you? How have they impacted your life? How have those relationships changed over time? Would you consider any of these friendships to be akin to a “love affair”?
- 2.** Lissa writes in *Other People's Words*, “Every dialogue will at some point be given new life.” Can you hear your loved one’s words after they pass? Are there any particular phrases you say that remind you of that person? Emily revisits her voicemails from Jonnie after his death, and they take on a whole new meaning. “Each of Jonnie’s messages was a dialogue, containing his voice from before, when he didn’t know what would happen to him or that he had so little time left, and the Jonnie of now, a presence that stretched beyond his death. Listening to the recordings, I let myself imagine that Jonnie really was still checking on Emily, making sure she was okay, calling her Sugar. His voice spoke simultaneously from the time before and after he died.” Do you have saved voicemails or texts that take on a new meaning after time?
- 3.** “Our speech is filled to overflowing with other people’s words,” the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin wrote. Lissa gives the examples of a singer covering another artist’s song, or moments when she catches herself using a phrase her parents used. Can you think of any other examples of other people’s words at play?

4. At the end of Jonnie's memorial service, Jonnie's loved ones are piled on a couch reminiscing about Jonnie at different stages throughout his life. His brother-in-law comes over to take a picture and capture the moment so they "have it for the slideshow at the funeral for whichever one of them dies next." Mercy calls times like that "a present moment full of itself and full of tomorrow." Is there a moment like that in your own life, when you sensed time collapsing, and the present and the past mixing together?

5. When Mercy opens the boxes Christine left for her, she finds a letter that she wrote to Christine decades earlier. "It was an envelope filled with Mercy's own words. Letters from a different time, so removed from the person Mercy was now that they took on the quality of someone else's voice. She could almost read them as someone else's story." Have you ever gone back and read an old journal entry? Can you identify with that person still? If you're comfortable with it, share a passage with the group.

6. Are there particular phrases that you use that you associate with yourself? What are the words you'd like others to carry with them after you're gone?

7. As she reads Bakhtin, Lissa Soep writes, "Inside our words, we are never without companions." Does that ring true for you? Can you give an example from your own life?

8. *Other People's Words* begins with the example of the wind phone in Ōtsuchi, widely used after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami in Tōhoku. Since then, other wind phones have popped up all over the world, including the U.S. Why do you think the concept is so universally appealing? What comfort does the idea bring, and how does it connect to Lissa's concept of double-voicing?

Recommended Reading

Curated by Lissa Soep

***Just Kids*, Patti Smith:** The story of Smith's life-defining friendship with Robert Mapplethorpe, and what it felt like to lose him

***Memorial Drive*, Natasha Trethewey:** A daughter's memoir, a poet's narrative, a devotion, a reckoning

***Easy Beauty*, Chloé Cooper Jones:** Line by line, Jones subtly and skillfully weaves an intellectual thread through her personal story without ever losing narrative momentum

***Where Reasons End*, Yiyun Li:** From which I learned so much about the power and limits of language through an experience of wretched loss

***Discourse in the Novel*, Mikhail Bakhtin:** This is best read with a companion text like Ken Hirschkop's *Cambridge Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin*

Let's Keep in Touch



Lissa Soep is senior editor for audio at Vox Media and special projects producer and senior scholar-in-residence at YR Media (formerly Youth Radio). She has produced award-winning radio stories for NPR and other outlets, and since 2020, she has edited narrative podcasts with Vox Media for Apple, Spotify, Audible, and Luminary and established the Vox Media Podcast Network Audio Academy, a learning and speaker series for aspiring and veteran audio makers. She has a PhD from Stanford, where she studied education, social theory, and linguistic anthropology with leading Bakhtin scholars. She lives in San Francisco. You can follow her on Instagram **@lissasoep**.



Follow us on Instagram, TikTok,
Facebook and Twitter

@spiegelandgrau

Sign up for our newsletter by scanning
the code below.

