

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Lynn Melnick uses the framework of a Dolly Parton playlist to organize the themes and stories that comprise *I've Had to Think Up a Way to Survive*. Why do you think Melnick chose to present the material in this manner? Do you prefer this over a more linear storytelling style? How would you describe your own way of telling stories about your life?
2. The book's title suggests that survival is a "creative act," as the author writes, an inventive process that can take place both "in the body" and "in the stories." What do you think the author meant by this?
3. Are there any musicians (or authors, artists, etc.) with whom you feel a sense of connection and camaraderie? What artist would help you tell your own story—and why? Which of their works is most representative of the story you would want to tell?
4. Dolly is such a well-known and beloved icon that many of us feel like we know her. Are there assumptions you made about Dolly's life and views based on how she has been portrayed—or presented herself—as a public figure? Did anything in this book surprise you about the singer or change how you thought about her?
5. This book is dedicated to the author's friends. What role does mentorship and friendship play in the author's life? Do friends and mentors have a significant influence on the way you regard your own life or the stories you tell about yourself?

6. The author talks frequently about rape culture and how it has permeated her life, as well as Dolly's. Can you think of instances where you or someone you love has come up against the obstacles that arise from rape culture?
7. Melnick's two daughters appear throughout the book, and she is remarkably open with them about her own teenage experiences. The chapter "The Grass Is Blue" includes a poem (p. 75) Melnick wrote for her eldest daughter, Ada, because she wanted to save her "from everything I learned the hard way." Has there been anyone in your life who tried to teach you important life lessons through art or another creative method? What is a creative way that you have tried teaching someone you love?
8. In the "Little Sparrow" chapter, the author writes about the effect that song has on her and singles out two fiddle notes, at 2:58 and 2:59, that have an enduring emotional impact. She cites journalist Dylan Jones (p. 175), who explains the neurological and emotional way we engage with songs that we love. Can you think of a song that never fails to bring about an emotional response in you? What song is it, and why do you think it has this effect? Is its power in the melody, the lyrics, or the singer's interpretation? When did you first hear the song—and do you think that original experience with the song is what resonates for you each time you hear it?
9. Survival through storytelling and the "refusal of secrets" is the path the author walks throughout the book. Have there been times in your own life when you've struggled with giving voice to a truth that felt imperative? Have you ever kept a secret that undermined your sense of truth? If you shared that secret, what were the consequences and how did it make you feel?

10. In the introduction, the author states that she arrived at Dollywood hoping to find the “real” Dolly, as well as herself. Can you think of a specific place in your own life where you have purposefully gone to learn something about yourself or another person? What were you hoping to discover, and if you found it, did it match your expectations?