

### **Book Club Set**

## The Lincoln Highway

By Amor Towels

#### **About the Author**

Born and raised in the Boston area, Amor Towles graduated from Yale and received an MA in English from Stanford. Having worked as an investment professional for over twenty years, he now devotes himself full time to writing in Manhattan, where he lives with his wife and two children. His novels Rules of Civility, A Gentleman in Moscow, and The Lincoln Highway, and his collection of shorter fiction called Table for Two have collectively sold more than six million copies and been translated into more than thirty languages. Both Bill Gates and President Barack Obama included A Gentleman in Moscow and The Lincoln Highway on their annual book recommendation lists.

Rules of Civility (2011) was a New York Times bestseller and was named by the Wall Street Journal as one of the best books of the year. The book's French translation received the 2012 Prix Fitzgerald. A Gentleman in Moscow (2016) was on the New York Times bestseller list for two years and was named one of the best books of 2016 by the Chicago Tribune, the Washington Post, the Philadelphia Inquirer, the San Francisco Chronicle, and NPR. In 2024, Paramount released a mini series based on the novel which stars Ewan McGregor. The Lincoln Highway (2021) debuted at #1 on the New York Times bestseller list. The book is being adapted as a feature film by Warner Brothers with Chris Storer, the creator of "The Bear", writing and directing. Table for Two (2024), a collection of six short stories and the novella "Eve in Hollywood", was a New York Times bestseller. Towles's short stories have appeared in the Paris Review (#112), Granta (#148), British Vogue, and Audible Originals. Access to some of these stories as well as a few short essays can be found in the Other Writing section of this website.

Towles wrote the introduction to Scribner's 75th anniversary edition of F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tender is the Night and the Penguin Classics edition of Ernest Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises. "As for Clothing", Towles's essay on Walden, appears in the anthology Now Comes Good Sailing: Writers Reflect on Henry David Thoreau.

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#### **About the Book**



A #1 New York Times Best Seller.

In June, 1954, eighteen-year-old Emmett Watson was driven home to Nebraska by the warden of the juvenile work farm where he had just served fifteen months for involuntary manslaughter. His mother long gone, his father recently deceased, and the family farm foreclosed upon by the bank, Emmett's intention is to pick up his eight-year-old brother, Billy, and head to California where they can start their lives anew.

But when the warden drives away, Emmett discovers that two friends from the work farm—the wily, charismatic Duchess and earnest, offbeat Woolly—have stowed away in the trunk of the warden's car. Together, they have hatched an altogether different plan for Emmett's future, one that will take the four of them on a fateful journey in the opposite direction to the city of New York.

Spanning ten days and told from multiple points of view, Towles's third novel is a multilayered tale of misadventure and self-discovery, populated by an eclectic cast of characters, from drifters who make their home riding the rails and larger-than-life vaudevillians to the aristocrats of the Upper East Side. An absorbing, exhilarating ride, The Lincoln Highway is a novel as vivid, sweeping, and moving as readers have come to expect from Towles's work.

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#### **Discussion Questions**



- 1. How do you think Emmett, Duchess, Woolly, and Sally's various upbringings—particularly their relationships to their parents—have shaped them? How have their parents' choices influenced their own desires and ambitions? When you were eighteen, which aspects of your parents' lives did you hope to emulate, and which did you hope to cast aside?
- 2. Early in the novel, Emmett meets Sister Agnes, a nun who describes the faith of children, who look upon a miracle "with awe and wonder, yes, but without disbelief." From the context, it's fairly clear that Sister Agnes is referencing Billy in her remark. How would you describe Billy's personality? While he is the youngest and least experienced character in the novel, one could argue that he has the greatest influence on other characters. What is it about Billy that makes this so?
- 3. Throughout the novel, an array of stories are recalled—stories drawn from Professor Abernathe's Compendium, from the Vaudevillian world of Duchess's father, from Shakespeare, cinema, and the Bible. What role do stories play in the shaping of the different characters' lives and personalities? Are these stories a productive or counterproductive force? What story—whether handed down to you from your parents or experienced in a novel or film—had a particularly strong influence on shaping you as a young person?
- 4. The novel takes place in the mid-1950s—a period of peace, prosperity, and upward mobility in the US; a period in which television was in its infancy, and which came just before the advent of rock & roll, the modern civil rights movement, and the "sexual revolution". How does the era shape the journeys of the characters, if at all? What aspects of their journeys are unique to their times, and what aspects were shared by you when you were on the verge of adulthood?
- 5. Hilary—an old friend and member of my book group—observed to me in passing, Well, of course, money is one of the central themes of your book. It's on the minds of all the characters. This hadn't occurred to me for one second! Do you think Hilary is right? On a related note, discuss the broader themes in the novel

- of moral accounting: debt and recompense, transgression and atonement, sin and redemption.
- 6. The City of New York is a thousand cities rolled into one. How does New York differ in the eyes of Emmett, Duchess, Woolly, and Billy?
- 7. One of the pleasures of writing fiction is discovering upon completion of a project that some thread of imagery has run through the work without your complete awareness—forming, in essence, an unintentional motif. While I was very conscious of the recurrence of Maps & Floorplans in the book, and Photographs, here are a few motifs that I only recognized after the fact: Timepieces such as Billy's surplus watch, the two grandfather clocks, Marceline's pocket watch, and Wallace's officer's watch; Tables, Desks, & Chairs such as the furniture in the doll case at FAO Schwarz, the long table in the dining room at the camp, and the desks of "Dennis" and Professor Abernathe; Cases such as the wicker picnic basket, Woolly's cigar box, Harry Hewett's Othello case, and the shoebox of preserves. What role do any of these motifs play in the thematic composition of the book?
- 8. The tone of each character's chapters differs from the tone of the other characters' chapters. How would you describe the style of the different characters' chapters? To what degree does the style shape your sense of the characters' personalities? How does reading Duchess's first person narrative influence you in comparison to Emmett's third person narrative?
- 9. Emmett's father leaves Emmett a quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" as part of his legacy. Do you agree with Emerson's argument that what is within the individual is new to nature, and that we have no idea of what we can achieve until we've tried? What about Emerson's idea strikes you as particularly American? What about this novel strikes you as particularly American? What does self-reliance mean to Emmett, to the Duchess, and to Sally?
- 10. There are a number of smaller legacies in the novel. In addition to the Emerson quotation left to Emmett, there are the recipes handed down to Sally, the officer's watch handed down in the Wolcott family, the St. Christopher medal passed from

- Billy to Ulysses. What role do these small legacies play within the larger themes of the novel? What smaller legacy have you received that has meant a great deal to you?
- 11. How would you describe each main character's transformation over the course of the novel? Which character do you think evolves most significantly? Which characters, in your opinion, found what they were looking for? Do you have a favorite character, and why them?
- 12. A question for those of you who have read my other books: While Rules of Civility covers a year in Katey's life, and A Gentleman in Moscow spans three decades, The Lincoln Highway takes place over just ten days. How does the span of time affect the narrative and your experience of it? What are the benefits and limitations that come with reading a novel spanning days rather than years? While A Gentleman in Moscow and The Lincoln Highway differ in duration, the ending of the two books match each other in a very specific way. What is this commonality? And what are its implications when considering the two stories side by side?
- 13. Woolly's sister, Sarah, observes to Emmett: "If you take a trait that by all appearances is a merit—a trait that is praised by pastors and poets, a trait that we have come to admire in our friends and hope to foster in our children—and you give it to some poor soul in abundance, it will almost certainly prove an obstacle to their happiness." Do you think this is true? What virtue do you think each of the main characters possesses in excess?
- 14. Given inflation, \$50,000 in 1954 would be the equivalent of about \$500,000 today. Late in your discussion, after you've had the chance to share a bottle of wine or a few cocktails, tell each other what you would do if you were suddenly given half a million dollars.

#### **Author Interview**



# When you finished A Gentleman in Moscow, why did you choose to write The Lincoln Highway next?

When I finish writing a novel, I find myself wanting to head in a new direction. That's why after writing Rules of Civility—which describes a year in the life of a young woman about to climb New York's socioeconomic ladder—I was eager to write A Gentleman in Moscow—which describes three decades in the life of a Russian aristocrat who's just lost everything. The Lincoln Highway allowed me to veer again in that the novel focuses on three eighteen-year-old boys on a journey in 1950s America that lasts only ten days.

The reason I make a shift like this is because it forces me to retool almost every element of my craft. By changing the setting, the era, and the cast of characters, I also must change the narrative's perspective, tone, and poetics so that they will be true to these people in this situation at this moment in time. Similarly, by changing the duration of the tale—from a year to thirty years to ten days—the structure, pacing, and scope of thematic discovery all have to change.

#### Can you tell us something about the origin of the story?

I always start with a very simple idea, a conceit that has popped into my head and which can be described in a sentence. In the years that follow, I'll keep returning to the idea, picturing the characters, the settings, the events, eventually filling a few notebooks while slowly gaining an understanding of the story as a whole. So, when I sit down to write the first chapter of a book, I've spent years imagining it already. (The adjacent photograph shows some of the notebooks I was working in including one from July 2014 with the book's original working title Unfinished Business.)

Generally, I can remember where I was when I had the initial notion for a book. With Rules of Civility I was at a friend's house on Long Island in 1990 looking at a collection

of the portraits that Walker Evans had taken with a hidden camera on the New York City subways in the late thirties. With A Gentleman in Moscow, I was walking into a hotel in Geneva in 2008. In the case of The Lincoln Highway, I have no idea where I was or what I was doing. I only remember being struck—more than a decade ago—by the notion of an honorable young man being driven home from a juvenile work program to the family farm only to discover that two of his fellow inmates have stowed away in the warden's car.

#### Can you talk about the shifting points of view in the book?

When I first outlined The Lincoln Highway, the plan was to describe the story from two alternating perspectives: Emmett's (in the third person) and Duchess's (in the first person). This seemed a natural way to juxtapose the two different personalities, upbringings, and moralities of the lead characters—and by extension, two different ways of being American.

But once I was writing, the voices of the other characters began to assert themselves, making their own claim on the narrative, insisting that their points of view be heard. First it was Sally and Woolly, then Pastor John and Ulysses, and finally Abacus and Billy. Now that the book is done, it's hard for me to imagine it could ever have been told from the perspectives of just Emmett and Duchess.

So far, I haven't used the omniscient narrator in my novels. Rather, I've either used the first person (as in Rules of Civility) or a third person which is an extension of the protagonist's point of view, tone and vocabulary (as in A Gentleman in Moscow). In The Lincoln Highway, I use both of these techniques. The chapters of six characters are told in a third person that reflects their point of view and tone, while the chapters of Duchess and Sally are in first person. Duchess and Sally both presented themselves to me as first person narrators right from the start, and I trusted that. I suppose that's because they have such strong and vocal personalities.

#### Can you talk about the structure of the book?

As a novelist and a reader, I'm very interested in the role that structure plays in story-telling. Both Rules of Civility and A Gentleman in Moscow were conceived with very specific structures in mind (the former spanning from one New Year's Eve to the next, and the latter spanning thirty-two years with an accordion-like shape). With The Lincoln Highway, from the first I imagined a story told over ten days.

When I began writing the book, it was laid out in sections titled Day One, Day Two, Day Three, and so on. But when I was about halfway through writing the first draft, I became frustrated. The book was feeling unwieldy, with sections that were cumbersome, slow, or off track. After dwelling for days on the draft's shortcomings to no avail, I suddenly realized that the book wasn't simply a story told over the course of ten days, it was a countdown. So, I went back to the beginning and began revising—having renamed the sections as Ten, Nine, Eight, and so on. This helped clarify for me what belonged in the story and how it should be told.

When I renamed the sections as a countdown, I assumed I would eventually restore the Day One, Day Two, Day Three titles. But when I finished the first draft, it seemed to me that the reader deserved to have the same experience while reading the book that I had while writing it: of knowing that the story was not open-ended, but ticking down day by day to its inescapable conclusion.

In some respects, The Lincoln Highway, seems to be a Bildungsroman in which the transition from youth to adulthood for the main characters is compressed from years into a matter of days. Can you comment on that?

When children are young, the nuclear family is a very tight unit (even when it's dysfunctional). The relationships between husband and wife, between parents and children, and among siblings are omnipresent, governing habits and behaviors, influencing perspectives and emotions. But when children come of age in their late

teens and early twenties, the household begins to unwind naturally, even purposefully. As young adults go off to college, enter careers, and get married, their focus shifts away from the household in which they were raised toward a world that they must shape for themselves.

The Lincoln Highway is certainly about this transition—in a concentrated fashion. Emmett, Duchess, Woolly and Sally are all in the process of moving on from the family structure in which they were raised to some unknown world of their own fashioning—with all the challenges and opportunities, all the insights and illusions that the transition implies.

#### Can you talk about some of the movies that are mentioned in the book?

Early in The Lincoln Highway, when Duchess observes Emmett allowing himself to be beaten up by Jake Snyder, he remarks that Emmett is like Alan Ladd in Shane, Frank Sinatra in From Here to Eternity, and Lee Marvin in The Wild One. When I was first drafting this scene, I came up with the Duchess's upside-down notion that sometimes the one being beaten up is the real "man". These three films immediately popped into my head as good examples of the dynamic and I added them to Duchess's reflections. But when I went back to review the passage, it occurred to me that I had no idea when these movies were made, and thus whether the Duchess could even have seen them. As it turned out, they were all released in 1953—in April, August, and December, respectively—less than a year before the events in the story. So, not only could the Duchess have seen them, together they provide us a revealing window into the America of 1954: a country still romanticizing the West, already mythologizing the Second World War, and beginning to grapple with a new generation of "wild" youth. The three movies also happen to be American classics and definitely worth a watch.

Another focus of the novel seems to be about the contrasting ethics of the characters...

The matter of ethics in the book is closely related to the youth-to-adulthood transition described above. When a young person sets out on their own, they will inevitably have to solidify some personal ethos by which they are going to live. I'm interested in the question of where this personal ethos comes from. To what degree does it spring from our community—from the shared traditions and mores that define our clan? Do our parents serve as an influence, or counter-influence in its formation? Does part of our ethos come to us in the form of stories, whether handed down or read in books? And to what degree do we fashion it on the fly based on our own instincts and experience?

#### Can you describe your process?

My process for writing The Lincoln Highway was very similar to my process for writing my other books. In each case, I designed the book over a period of years—ultimately generating an outline that details the settings, characters, and events chapter by chapter, from the opening pages right up to the final scene.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, one of the reasons I outline with such care is to free up my imagination while I'm writing the book. Because I have a detailed outline in place, when I'm starting a chapter I don't have to wonder what the setting or key events are going to be. Instead, I can focus on the psychological nuances of the moment, the poetry of the language, and whatever surfaces from my subconscious.

While I'm writing my first draft, I don't share my work. But once I've completed the draft and cleaned it up, I give it to my wife, my editor in New York, my editor in London, and a few friends, asking that they all give me feedback within a few weeks. I then use their varied responses to reconsider the book's strengths and weaknesses and begin the process of revising. Generally, I will revise the book from beginning to end at least twice before it reaches the reader.

Having said that you outline your books thoroughly, are there surprises that arise during the course of the writing?

While I'm writing chapters, I am constantly revising the back half of the outline or adding to it, as I gain a better understanding of my story. But I'm also adapting to surprises that surface from the work.

In the case of this novel, the single biggest surprise was the Lincoln Highway itself. When I conceived of the story, I had no idea that it existed. I stumbled across it as I was mapping out the route that the characters were going to take out of Nebraska. Once I learned the history of the highway—and that it extended from Times Square to San Francisco—I couldn't believe my luck. Almost immediately, the Lincoln Highway reinforced or reshaped a number of the book's themes and events.

Another fortuitous discovery relates to the photograph that's in the book. While I avoid doing applied research before writing a novel, I do like to do some research once my first draft is complete to sharpen details or identify new threads for possible inclusion. To that end, when I was finished writing the first draft of The Lincoln Highway, I decided to look at the front pages of the New York Times for the ten days on which my story takes place: June 12 to June 21, 1954. As I was reviewing them, I was amazed by a story on June 14th announcing that all activity in New York City would stop for ten minutes on the following day as part of a nuclear attack simulation. When I turned to the front page for June 15th to see what had happened, there was a photograph of Times Square all but abandoned. That the photograph should be of the very spot where the Lincoln Highway begins seemed a coincidence too great to ignore, so I added the chapter of Woolly reading the old headlines.

#### Are there connections between The Lincoln Highway and your other books?

Despite the fact that I like to go in new directions whenever I write a new book, there are always connections between my books. In The Lincoln Highway the biggest connection, of course, is the character Wallace "Woolly" Martin, the nephew of Wallace Wolcott from Rules of Civility.

Late in The Lincoln Highway Woolly gives Billy an old officer's watch that has been handed down through his family from generation to generation. While doing so, Woolly explains that the watch's dial is black and numbers white (in an inversion of the typical watch face), so that the dial would be less likely to attract the eye of snipers. Attentive readers of my work will recognize this watch as the very one that appears in Rules of Civility. In that novel, when Wallace is getting ready to leave New York for the Spanish Civil War in the summer of 1938, he and Katey gather together Christmas presents for his family to be delivered in December. The last gift that Wallace prepares is this officer's watch, which he takes from his wrist and wraps for his young nephew and namesake. The Wolcott's camp in the Adirondacks also figures prominently in Rules of Civility as the retreat where Katey goes to meet Tinker in seclusion.

# Your premise could have been realized in many different decades. Why did you decide to set the story in 1954?

I find this moment in American history fascinating, but less for what was happening than for what was about to happen.

With the Korean War having concluded in July 1953, America was at peace in 1954; but the country's entanglement in the Vietnam War was about to begin. Although America didn't ramp up its full military presence in Vietnam until 1965, in November 1955, President Eisenhower deployed the Military Assistance Advisory Group. These were the American military personnel we sent to train South Vietnamese armed forces. It was the first step that would eventually lead to our full involvement in the war.

The battle for civil rights in America is as old as the Union itself, but in 1954, the modern civil rights movement was about to begin. On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court handed down its landmark decision on Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, initiating the end of legal segregation and the concept of "separate but equal," at least on paper. In the decade that followed would come Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her bus seat and the

resulting Montgomery Bus Boycott led by Martin Luther King (1955), the lunch counter protests (1960), the Freedom Riders (1961), the March on Washington (1963), and countless other public actions culminating in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

In 1954, the "sexual revolution" was about to begin. It was in December 1953 that Hugh Heffner published the first issue of Playboy with an old nude of Marilyn Monroe serving as its centerfold—launching a new era of publicly acceptable pornography. That same year, the Kinsey Report on female sexuality was released, bringing private discussions of bedroom behavior into the public square. But the revolution would really take off when the Pill was approved in 1961, giving women and men the ability to engage in sexual activity with less concern over long term repercussions.

In 1954, television and rock & roll, two of the greatest cultural influences of the 20th century, were about to take off. In 1950, there were only one million households in the US with a television set. By 1954, that had grown to 30 million and by 1959, 88% of US households would have at least one set. In those first ten years of television many of the lasting formats and idioms of the medium were defined from the evening news broadcast to the sitcom and from the soap opera to the late-night talk show.

1954 saw the release of the first two hits of the Rock & Roll era: "Shake, Rattle, and Roll" by Big Joe Turner and "Rock around the Clock" by Bill Hailey and the Comets. ("Rock Around the Clock" would have a particularly large impact when it was chosen to accompany the opening credits of the 1955 movie The Blackboard Jungle, a drama about an inner-city high school, starring the young Sidney Poitier.) To give some sense of the world at the time, the top thirty songs at the end of 1953 according to Billboard included the likes of Nat King Cole, Patti Page, Eddie Fisher, Tony Bennett and three songs by Perry Como. Which is to say that pop music before 1954 was a crooners' game. Fifteen years later, the Billboard charts would be dominated by the likes of the Beatles, the Doors, the Rolling Stones, Steppenwolf, and Sly & the Family Stone.

While Rock & Roll is often referenced as a complement to the rise in youth culture in America, I would argue that it was a fundamental cause of the modern youth movement. At no point in prior history did teenagers anywhere in the world have an effective means by which they could share their perspectives with each other. Rock & Roll was an art form created and performed by young people for young people with their own experiences, hopes, and complaints as its principle subject matter. Rock & Roll was the first public forum in which the young could assemble, express themselves, and rally each other in support of their own priorities. But as I say, all of this was about to happen.

Finally, in 1954 the road culture of modern America was about to begin. In 1954, America had 6% of the world's population and 60% of its cars, but the automobile was primarily used as a local convenience. When the Lincoln Highway was conceived by Carl Fisher in 1912, 90% of all roads in America were unpaved. In the 1920s, the federal government began investing in highways and established the first numbered routes, but long-distance roads remained fairly rudimentary for decades. It wasn't until June 1956 with the passage of the Federal Aid Highway Act that the country began building the Interstate Highway System—the multilane, high speed highways that crisscrossed the nation, supporting not only the transportation of goods, but of workers, vacationers, and the curious. In the decade that followed, Americans would make great use of the new roads. While in 1950, 450 million vehicle miles were travelled in the US, by 1965, that number had doubled. In 1954, Holiday Inn had only three locations, but it would have 500 ten years later, and 1000 by 1968. 1954 was the year that both McDonalds and Burger King were launched.

## Why is the dialogue in the book indicated by em dashes rather than quotation marks?

In my first novel, Rules of Civility, I also used em dashes instead of quotation marks. Quotation marks are designed to let an author insert little parenthetical observations or characterizations in the middle of dialogue:

"I knew your father well," he said soberly, "back in the early days of the war..."

"Yes," she said, smoothing her skirt, "another cup of tea would be lovely..."

By eliminating the quotation marks in Rules, I was forced to abandon these little clarifications and write conversation in such a way that the dialogue would do most of the work on its own. I also think it resulted in exchanges with a sharper delivery and quicker pace.

It seemed natural to use them again in The Lincoln Highway for the same reasons.

On page 456, when Woolly winds his watch sixteen times for six days in a row "on porpoise", is that a typo?

There are multiple words and phrases throughout the book which Woolly alters, such as "absotively" or "in the muddle" or "an undersight". He uses the word "porpoise" in place of "purpose" twice in the book. The first time occurs on p.192 while he is recalling his Gettysburg address recitation: "For all intents and porpoises (as Woolly used to say) there are twelve sentences, not ten..." So no, this is not a typo. It is very much on porpoise.

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#### Other Links and Resources

#### Is Fettucine Mio Amore a real dish?



One of my best friends growing up was an Italian-American named Claudio, who lived in Milan. When we were boys in the 1970s and Claudio would come to New England for the summer, he would be horrified by the American insistence upon drowning all pasta in a thick red sauce. A household should serve pasta in twenty different ways, he would argue, and each preparation should highlight a few essential flavors through intensity rather than volume.

Fettucine Mio Amore, the dish that the Duchess makes for Emmett, Woolly, Billy, and Sally on their last night together, is an homage to my old friend and a favorite of the Towles family. Here's the recipe:

1/4 cup olive oil

1 large or two small onions, halved and thinly sliced

1 pound of smoked American bacon, cut crosswise into 1/4 inch strips

1 bay leaf

3/4 cup dry white wine

1 teaspoon oregano

1 teaspoon red pepper flakes

3/4 cup crushed tomatoes or tomato sauce (and not an ounce more!)

½ cup chicken broth

½ cup parmesan

Fettuccine for four, preferably fresh, cooked until al dente

In a reasonably deep saucepan, cook the onions in the olive oil until soft and translucent, then set the onions aside. In the same pan, fry the bacon with the bay leaf until the bacon is brown but not crisp. Pour off most, but not all of the bacon fat. Add back the onions, the white wine, and let simmer for a few minutes. Add the tomato sauce, chicken broth, oregano and pepper flakes, stir and let simmer for another ten

minutes. (Add a little more chicken broth as necessary, if the sauce is drying out.) Toss about 1/4 of the sauce with the cooked fettuccine and parmesan, divide the pasta on the plates, then spoon the rest of the sauce on top of the pasta. Serves four.

- Speech on the Lincoln Highway: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08tfksX0XdY&t=2516s
- The Lincoln Highway Music: https://www.amortowles.com/the-lincoln-highway-music/

### Share your thoughts with other readers!

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As a group	o we rate	d this boo	k:		
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Ugh!		It was OK		Loved it!	
Would we	recomme	end this bo	ook to other be	ook clubs?	
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