STUTTGART BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

A Long Way Down by Nick Hornby

About the Book

Four people meet one New Year's Eve on the roof of a north London tower block, known locally as Toppers' House because of its popularity as a suicide spot. First to arrive is Martin who arrives prepared with ladders and wire cutters to get past the security fence which is meant to stop people jumping. He is a celebrity has-been who is now the host of a daytime show on a cable channel which no one watches. He had once been the popular co-presenter of a breakfast show on one of the major channels, but a series of scandals culminated in him having sex with a fifteen year old girl who took her story to the papers. Martin was imprisoned, losing his career, his wife and daughters, his home and his sense of worth.

But while Martin has a last cigarette, Maureen arrives and taps him on the shoulder. She is a middle aged woman with a severely disabled son who can not respond to her or his environment in any way. The result of a one night stand – a surprising thing in itself for such a deeply reserved character – Matty has been the sum total of her life for almost two decades as she has cared for him constantly. Maureen has been planning her suicide for months and has booked Matty into a respite care home for the night.

Jess, on the other hand, is an impetuous, mixed up – and drunk – eighteen year old who goes to the roof from a party in a squat some floors below on a spur of the moment decision. Her sister disappeared some years before and her boyfriend Chas has recently dumped her without explanation. She is angry and disappointed that he was not at the party, and now her sudden feeling of lostness becomes something exciting as she can throw herself into the thrill of committing suicide.

The fourth person to arrive is JJ, an American pizza delivery boy with an order for the squat. He hadn't planned to commit suicide beforehand, but being at Toppers' House made it seem like a good idea. JJ feels like his life has fallen apart. A year ago his band broke up, shortly followed by his girlfriend dumping him. Music was JJ's life, but now with only menial jobs to bring in the money and no band to play in, he sees himself as a failed musician, and therefore a failure in life.

As the four talk, at Jess's suggestion, about why they are there, they conclude that the moment has passed for each of them. Despite their marked differences in personality and background, they decide to go together to find Chas. It marks the beginning of a three month process of reflecting on their lives as they meet together since only they know what each other are going through.

About the Author

Nick Hornby was born in 1957 and lives in Highbury, north London, close to the home of his beloved Arsenal football club. Zadie Smith wrote in Time:

'Every English writer needs their corner that is forever England - but only a few brave men choose to make that corner Highbury. Who would have thought the square mile around Arsenal's stadium could be a suitable surrogate for the whole wide world?'

A former English teacher and journalist, he is the author of three previous novels – High Fidelity (1996), About a Boy (1998) and How to be Good (2001) – and two works of non-fiction – Fever Pitch (1991) and 31 Songs (2002). Fever Pitch, High Fidelity and About A Boy have all been made into successful films, starring Colin Firth, John Cusak and Hugh Grant respectively. Bobby and Peter Farrelly's new version of Fever Pitch (with the sport obsession transferred from football to baseball), starring Jimmy Fallon and Drew Barrymore, is released in 2005. The movie rights for How To Be Good have been sold to Columbia Pictures.

Nick Hornby has also edited two anthologies, My Favourite Year and Speaking with the AngelHe also writes a column called 'Stuff I've Been Reading' for Believer http://www.believermag.com/ magazine in the USA. Fourteen of the articles have been published as a book, The Polysyllabic Spree (published by Believer Books in aid of two charities). In 1999 he was awarded the E. M. Forster Award by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 2002 he won the W. H. Smith Award for Fiction and in 2003 was honoured with the Writers' Writer Award at the Orange Word International Writers Festival.

Hornby says:

'I suppose the idea for A Long Way Down began a long time ago when I read that there were nights of the year when suicides spike. Where I live in north London there are also accounts of suicides that take place at Archway Bridge. If you've got a well-known suicide spot, and a night of the year when people choose to die, people must see each other. That was an idea that was sufficiently interesting to me not to let go of.' (www.nickhornby.co.uk)

For more on Nick Hornby, including extracts from the books, see www.nickhornby.co.uk.

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Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe each of the four main characters? Which of them do you most identify with? Why? What was it about the others which made it more difficult to identify with them?
2. What has motivated Martin in the past? What motivates him to consider suicide? What makes him keep going over the next three months?
3. How does Martin change during the course of the story? What brings about these changes? How important a factor is people being honest with him?
4. Nick Hornby says:
   'I suppose of all the plights in the book, I identify with Maureen most because I have a child with a disability. She's not me, and her child is not my child, but once you're in that world of disability and carers, which I am, the stories you hear are astonishingly powerful. I think that anyone would empathise with her story, but because of a route that one part of my life has taken, I am more exposed to those thoughts than many.'
   What made you feel that Hornby has a particular sympathy for Maureen as you read A Long Way Down? How did Maureen's situation impact you?
5. What journey of faith is Maureen on during this story? What affects her attitude to the church at different points in the story? How real would you say her faith is?
6. Why do you think Jess is the volatile person she is? To what extent is she responsible for her behaviour, and to what extent is she a victim of circumstances?
7. What is the unique contribution which Jess makes to the group? Do you think they would have changed as they did without her? Why/why not? What do the others contribute?
8. Why does JJ first lie about his illness and then finally tell the truth?
9. What really matters to JJ apart from music? How do his perspectives on himself and others change?
10. 'I don't know why, but it was kind of liberating, saying what you really wanted, even if you couldn't have it. When I'd invented that Cosmic Tony guy for Maureen, I'd put limits on his superpowers because I thought we might see what kind of practical assistance Maureen needed. And as it turned out, she needed a vacation and we could help, so Cosmic Tony turned out to be a guy worth knowing. But if there's no superpower limit, then you get to find out all kinds of other s***, like, I don't know, the thing that's wrong with you in the first place.' (JJ, p. 198)
    What do you think each of the characters most need? Did your thoughts on this change as you read the book?
11. JJ continues: 'We all spend so much time not saying what we want, because we know we can't have it. And because it sounds ungracious, or ungrateful, or disloyal, or childish, or banal. Or because we're so desperate to pretend that things are OK, really, that confessing to ourselves they're not looks like a bad move. Go on, say what you want. . . . Whatever it is, say it to yourself. The truth will set you free. Either that or it'll get you a punch in the nose. Surviving in whatever life you're living means lying, and lying corrodes the soul, so take a break from the lies for just one minute.' (p. 198, 199)
    What do you really want, deep down? Do you agree with JJ that survival means lying, and lying corrodes the soul? Why/why not? When Jesus said, 'You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free' (John 8:32, NLT), he put it in the context of ongoing obedience to him. Later (John 14:6) he made clear that he is the truth. What do these perspectives add to what JJ said? How do you feel about Jesus' statement that true freedom comes through knowing him?
12. 'So, have I learned not to sleep with sixteen-year-olds, or attractive young women? No. And yet just about everyone I've evr interviewed has told me that by doing something or other – recovering from cancer, climbing a mountain, playing the part of a serial killer in a movie – they have learned something about themselves. And I always nod and smile thoughtfully, when I really want to pin them down. "What did you learn from the cancer, actually? That you don't like being sick? That you don't want to die? That wigs make your scalp itch? Come on, be specific." I suspect it's something they tell themselves in order to turn the experience into something that might appear valuable, rather than a complete and utter waste of time.' (Martin, p. 208)
    Do you agree with Martin? Why/why not? What do they each learn about themselves, even if they don't yet realise it?
13. What do you think are the best ways to help someone who feels suicidal? How do you get over the problem faced by the four characters in A Long Way Down that they felt no one else could understand their situation?
14. Nick Hornby writes:
    'I'd always presumed there were great numbers of people who thought about suicide as a door that was open to them. It never occurred to me that people didn't think about it. Having talked to a couple of friends, explaining that it was something I was writing about, I was quite startled that some of them had never thought of suicide, and I suspect those people are in a minority. Most people at their darkest moments have had that speculation; I know I have, though the characters in my novel have taken it a stage further than I ever have, by moving from thought into action.' (www.nickhornby.co.uk)
    What is your perspective on suicide? What, if anything, has made you consider it as an option? What helped you to go on with life?