

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Putting Away Childish Things:

A Novel of Modern Faith

by

Marcus J. Borg

Some reading groups discuss the whole of a book in one session with participants reading all of it before they gather to talk about it for an hour or two. Some schedule many sessions on a book, reading it section by section over an extended period of time and meeting to discuss the portion they have just read.

If your group is in the first category—one session that presumes that participants have read the whole novel by then—you might consider the following questions:

1. The main characters are Kate Riley, Martin Erikson, and Erin Mattson. What do you think of each of them? What are their issues? Do they change—and if so, how and why?
2. The didactic theme of the novel is different understandings of what it means to be Christian today—how to understand Christianity in an Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment world. These differences include how to understand the Bible, Adam and Eve and “original sin,” the Christmas stories, Jesus and the Gospels, the Bible’s teachings about homosexuality, the meaning of “believe,” and so forth. What do you make of the differences presented in the novel? What did you find persuasive, or not? What was new? Was anything unsettling or disturbing? Did the novel change your understanding of Christianity (or religion) in any way?
3. Reflect on the novel’s title, *Putting Away Childish Things*. It echoes words from the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:11: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” How do you see this applying to the novel? To the main characters? What “childish ways” do you see in their thoughts and behaviors? To what extent do you think they have “put an end to childish ways”?

If your group is in the second category—meeting for several sessions and reading an assigned number of chapters before each session, you will do things quite differently. Group

leaders—ideally a man and a woman—will need to decide how many sessions and thus how to divide the novel into assigned chapters.

If this is a “new group” rather than a continuing group in which people already know each other, you might spend much or all of the first session on “group formation” by providing participants an opportunity to begin to know each other.

If the group is small (fifteen or fewer?), you could keep the participants together as they share their responses to the questions below. If the group is larger, you may want to divide them into small groups of four or five. Interaction in which everybody speaks is the goal—if not in a large group, then at least in small groups. Invite participants to introduce themselves with brief answers to the following questions:

- Where were you born and where did you grow up?
- What was your religion/denomination (or lack thereof) as you grew up?
- What religion/denomination (or not) are you now?
- And a question that Kate asks her class: What was your impression of the Bible by the end of childhood? And now?

Encourage them simply to share this information as they go around the group—no conversation until all have had their say. Once everybody has been heard from, then conversation can begin for as much time as has been set aside for it. Participants can respond to what they have heard from others or ask questions about what they’ve heard.

In subsequent sessions, you may want to invite the group to think about and then share with each other their responses to the religious/theological issues encountered in the novel. Examples:

- Chapter 3: What do you think of what Kate says during her radio interviews about her book on the Christmas stories? About these stories as “parables”?
- Chapters 9 and 10: How would you respond to the question about what you imagine it would have been like to live within the premodern worldview? What do you think about the students’ responses? And what do you think about Kate’s handout explaining that all religions are human products, human constructions?
- Chapter 12: What do you think of Martin’s “outline” for his lecture on “Mysticism and the Christian Path”? Do you feel like you understand what he’s talking about?
- Chapter 14: How would you respond to the question about whether Adam and Eve were real people? About creation stories as myths? About what this might mean for the notion of “original sin”? What do you think of what the students say as they puzzle about this?
- Chapter 18: Erin and Kate talk about homosexuality in the Bible. What do you think of Erin’s concerns? What do you think of Kate’s interaction with her and the understanding that she suggests?

- Chapter 21: What do you make of the distinction between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus? Does it make sense to you? Is it illuminating or confusing, perplexing?
- Chapter 22: Martin and Margaret Bardwell talk about David Friedrich Strauss and his understanding of gospel stories that include spectacular events. What do you think about this—about whether it’s important that spectacular events really happened back then, or whether it makes more sense to think about them as symbolic or parabolic stories?
- Chapter 27: Kate teaches a class about the meanings of “believe” and “faith.” What are the premodern and modern meanings of these words? Do you find them illuminating? What do you think of how deeply Kate was affected by what she presented in class?

Finally:

- In a concluding session or two, you could consider the “large” questions listed above (in the section for groups that meet only once to talk about this book).
- You might also discuss whether this novel has changed—or underlined—the way you think about what it means to be Christian today.