

A Reading Group Guide to

A Heart in a Body in the World

by Deb Caletti

About the Book:

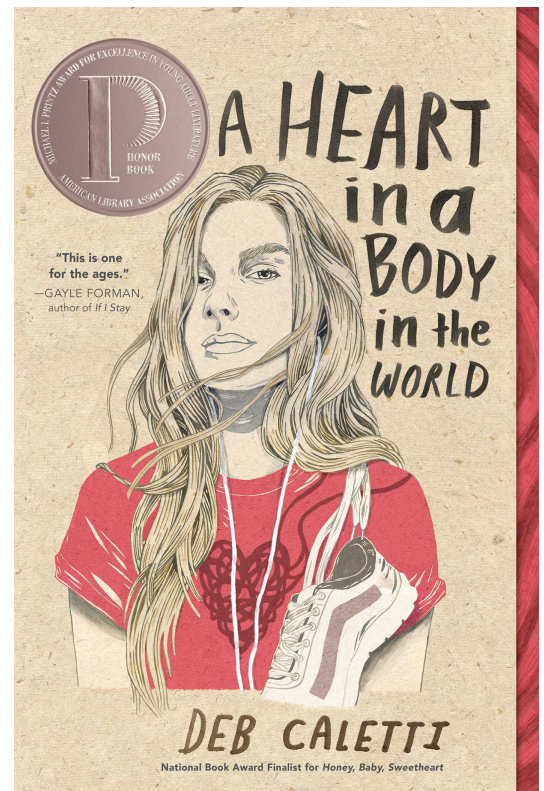
Each step in Annabelle's 2,700-mile cross-country run brings her closer to facing a trauma from her past in National Book Award finalist Deb Caletti's novel about the heart, all the ways it breaks, and its journey to healing. Because sometimes against our will, against all odds, we go forward.

Then... Annabelle's life wasn't perfect, but it was full-full of friends, family, love. And a boy...whose attention Annabelle found flattering and unsettling all at once. Until that attention intensified.

Now... Annabelle is running. Running from the pain and the tragedy from the past year. With only Grandpa Ed and the journal she fills with words she can't speak out loud, Annabelle runs from Seattle to Washington, DC and toward a destination she doesn't understand but is determined to reach. With every beat of her heart, every stride of her feet, Annabelle steps closer to healing-and the strength she discovers within herself to let love and hope back into her life. Annabelle's journey is the ultimate testament to the human heart, and how it goes on after being broken.

Discussion Questions

1. The author begins the book with a quote from Alfred Lansing's *Endurance: Shackleton's Incredible Voyage*. What does this quote tell you about the story before you read? What significance does Lansing's work end up having in the story?
2. What specific event causes Annabelle to start running? At this point in the story, do you understand why this affects her so strongly? Do you think Annabelle understands why she's running? Why do you think the author takes her time in giving us the full picture of what happened to Annabelle?
3. How does Gina's anxiety affect Annabelle? What does Annabelle worry about? How does she cope with her anxiety? Did worrying prevent bad things from happening to her? Can you relate to Annabelle and Gina? If so, how do you tackle your anxiety?
4. Annabelle "understands that when push comes to shove, literally or otherwise, that she must rely on other people being good and doing the right thing. And this . . . is a terrifying thing to rely on. It's fine most of the time, but at others, it is a thin thread." Why does she feel this way? Do you agree with her assessment? Have you ever felt like you were relying on others to be good?
5. In the Best Western hotel, on Annabelle's first night away, "Malcolm's and Annabelle's eyes meet and have a conversation. In that split second, stuff is decided, a vow is made." Which one of them is making a vow, and what is it? Why is Malcolm so supportive of Annabelle's plan? What does Malcolm understand early on that Gina fails to? Why do you think that is? Consider their roles as brother and mother in your answer. How does Malcolm continue to show his support throughout the run?
6. The book states: "Every time she waited at a bus stop or was at a party with boys and alcohol or was just plain alone, she felt the high alert of vigilance. You could forget that some people don't live this way. Part of the population rarely even thinks like this. They just walk around without fear and wait at bus stops and go to parties." Have you or someone you know ever felt this way? What might contribute to this feeling? How might this feeling be changed?
7. Annabelle says of Olivia and Zach that "it's the people who know you and love you that save you." Do you think this is always true? In what ways can the people who love you save you? Who saves Annabelle?
8. What did her experience with Georgie Zacharro teach Annabelle? Did these interactions impact the way she dealt with The Taker?



Discussion Questions (cont)

9. Why does Annabelle cut her own hair off? What do you think the hair signifies to her? Do you think she is confronting her feelings by taking this action? Explain your answer. How does this new haircut change the way people interact with her?
11. Why do Gina and Grandpa Ed fight so much? What effect does their fighting have on Malcolm and Annabelle? Discuss the complexity often found in family dynamics and whether it's easy to change them. Can family members say things to one another that no one else can? Explain your answer.
12. In her pack, Annabelle keeps a collection of things that give her "hope that she might one day have hope." What does this mean? Why don't these items give her hope directly? What do they symbolize? How much hope does she have by the end of the story? How important is hope for survival?
13. Why is it so difficult for Annabelle to accept the attention she gets for her run, including the donations, the support from the groups she meets on her route, and the interview requests? Is it more or less difficult for her to accept help from people she knows, like Olivia and Zach Oh? Think about her reasons for running, the guilt she carries. How would you feel about the attention if you were in Annabelle's shoes? Does she understand how many people showing support share a degree of her experience? Discuss how Annabelle's run makes her an unintentional activist at first, and then a more empowered one.
14. What is left when Annabelle gives up her guilt, anxiety, and blame? Why does anger come as such a shock to her? Has she ever felt or expressed this sort of rage before? What does she do with her anger? Why is showing or feeling anger often viewed negatively, as something to avoid? Can anger be a good thing?
15. After almost being hit by a Hostess truck, Annabelle yells a profanity at the driver. Think about the use of profanity in this context. What does the word represent to Annabelle? How do her actions in this moment affect her? How do you choose the words you use? Do you think it's the words themselves or the tone that's more important?
16. We learn very early on in the book that Annabelle suffers from PTSD. How does this manifest itself in her life? Do your feelings toward Annabelle change as you gradually learn about the event that causes her PTSD? What does she have in common with other PTSD sufferers? What did you know about PTSD before the book? Do you think PTSD can be misunderstood? Explain your answer.
17. Why does Annabelle start writing facts about the heart in her Moleskine notebook? What kinds of information does she collect? How does this activity help her come to terms with what she is feeling? What topics might you write about if you're upset? Why can information be comforting?
18. Annabelle can't bring herself to say the name of the boy who hurt her, instead calling him "The Taker." Why is this name appropriate for him? What does the use of his real name at the end of the book signify? What has changed? What has Annabelle reclaimed?
19. Why is Annabelle so affected by the lightning storm while running? What about the deer that she sees die? What do these two events represent in her mind? What do you think could help her deal with the lingering effects of her past trauma?
20. Why does Annabelle feel like she should be punished for her part in the tragedy? Do you think she's guilty of anything? How much of the blame should go toward societal expectations and representations of boys and girls and love? What kind of expectations do you have about relationships and love based on movies, TV shows, and advertisements you see? How do you evaluate the strength of a relationship? How do you show respect for someone?
21. What is it about Luke that allows Annabelle to trust him? How does he change his behaviour as a reaction to what he knows about her? How is he different than The Taker? What impact does Luke and his grandmother's presence have on Annabelle and her grandfather's trek east? Compare and contrast both pairs' attitudes toward life. How do Annabelle's and Luke's grandparents model what it means to have a caring relationship?
22. What do you think Annabelle's next step(s) will be? What might be some of the long-term effects of her run? What kind of impact does it have on a larger community? How does it contribute to a larger conversation?

Extension Activities

1. Annabelle has always used running as a way to relieve stress, clear her mind, and centre herself. Begin your own routine to alleviate the stresses in your life. Research methods for finding calm and introspection, like yoga or meditation. Spend a few hours doing your selected activity, and then write an essay using a journal-entry style that reflects on your experience. How did it make you feel? Will you continue to incorporate it into your life? How might it offer a healthy method for coping with life's stresses?
2. This book touches on a lot of crucial topics, including gun control, mental health, sexism, sexual harassment, and the #MeToo movement. Choose one of these movements and make your voice heard. Write a letter to your local representative to share your view and concerns on one of these topics. What would you like them to be more aware of? What change is needed, and how would you like them to address it with legislation?

Extension Activities (cont)

3. As Annabelle runs through various states, she notices the beauty in each of them. What landmarks and natural features make your state unique and beautiful? Choose one of these and write an article for a travel magazine about what it is and what makes it beautiful. Then write a personal essay as if you're walking through the landmark on foot, explaining what you see as you see it. How does this shift in point of view and style change your perspective on the landmark? Think about how the landmark looks from afar and how it looks up close, and relate this to Annabelle's experiences as she runs from Seattle and then must address her trauma when she arrives in DC. How does time or distance change the way we see things?
4. Luke makes a mix tape for Annabelle that speaks to her experience running across the country. Choose a major event in your life and create your own mix of music that explains or reflects the experience. If you shared the experience with another person, perhaps you could share your "mix tape" with them.
5. Think about society's perceptions of female anger, and how angry women have been represented in books and movies like *Thelma and Louise*, Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, and *Thor: Ragnarok*. Form a discussion group with four classmates; each member should choose a book or movie that deals with feminine rage, and then discuss their observations and feelings with the group.

Guide written by Cory Grimminck, Director of the Portland District Library in Michigan.

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Other books by Deb Caletti

