

# SMALL WORLD

*A Novel* LAURA ZIGMAN

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Joyce and Lydia both grew up in the shadow of their sister Eleanor's disability and, after her death, in the shadow of their parents' grief. How did that impact the way they interacted with Eleanor as children? What kinds of coping mechanisms did they develop in childhood and carry with them into adulthood?
2. Joyce and Lydia are four years apart, and Eleanor was the middle sister. Do you think birth order and age gaps contribute to how siblings experience the same events within families? How do Joyce and Lydia see the Mellishman family similarly and differently?
3. Siblings, especially sisters, are often experts at getting under each other's skin because they know exactly what buttons to push. How do Joyce's and Lydia's patterns from childhood affect how they deal with the New People upstairs?
4. Joyce's poems from Small World posts often appear before a shift in perspective or to punctuate chapters. What do you think they say about Joyce's state of mind or feelings? How do her poems change over the course of the novel?
5. Lydia keeps a number of secrets from Joyce that are revealed toward the end of the book. Why do you think she felt she had to keep them? How do these revelations from childhood change their relationship as adults? Why do you think these secrets made Joyce feel excluded?



6. Joyce's job at EverMore as an archivist working on family photo projects and videos is a persistent reminder of the sadness in her own family history. Do you think constantly comparing the Mellishman family to other families is a help or hindrance to Joyce in dealing with her past?
7. Community is an important aspect of the book, whether it's the online community of Small World or the community of Joyce and Lydia and their neighbors. What do you think the novel has to say about how we build community today?
8. Let's discuss the title. *Small World* refers to the name of the social media platform where Joyce spends a lot of time, but it could also refer to how small Joyce's world has gotten since her divorce from Tom. What are some other ways the title could be interpreted?
9. Toward the end of the book, Lydia reveals that she has multiple sclerosis and fears becoming a burden to her sister. What do you think this says about her particular experience with disability and about what we owe one another?
10. Why do you think Joyce and Lydia have different reactions to Stan and Sonia's upstairs yoga studio and different approaches to dealing with it? Which approach made more sense to you and why?
11. Despite her work as an archivist, Joyce misses some key details about the people closest to her. She doesn't notice that Lydia has lost her job and doesn't pick up on the fact that Erin is gay. Joyce describes Lydia as being "in her own world," but do you think this could apply to Joyce as well? How do you think this way of moving through life shapes her respective relationships with Erin, Lydia, and Tom?
12. In the beginning of the novel, Joyce says, "Sisterhood, like marriage, takes hard work." At first, Joyce is excited for Lydia to move in and hopes they'll become close as adult roommates. However, they begin to find themselves at odds and increasingly struggle to understand each other, though they eventually find common ground. Do you see them growing closer together in years to come, or do you think they'll always drive each other a little bit crazy, the way most sisters do?