Book Club Questions for Dear Edward by Ann Napolitano

written by Heather Caliendo  |  April 1, 2020

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Book club questions for *Dear Edward* by Ann Napolitano covers all the key events and themes in this moving coming-of-age story. There will be spoilers so for more context about
Dear Edward was inspired by the true story of Ruben Van Assouw, the sole survivor of a plane crash in 2010. In this interview with Library Journal, the author Ann Napolitano explains why the story grabbed her:

I think I couldn’t let go because I was both deeply worried about Ruben and deeply curious about how he could go on after such a terrible tragedy. His aunt and uncle did an amazing job of protecting Ruben’s privacy once he was released from the hospital, but that meant I couldn’t know that he became okay. I had to create a set of circumstances under which a little boy in that situation could believably become a whole person, in spite of—or even because of—what he’d lost. I needed him to be okay, so I had to write my way into believing that was possible.

The synopsis:

One summer morning, twelve-year-old Edward Adler, his beloved older brother, his parents, and 183 other passengers board a flight in Newark headed for Los Angeles. Among them are a Wall Street wunderkind, a young woman coming to terms with an unexpected pregnancy, an injured veteran returning from Afghanistan, a business tycoon, and a free-spirited woman running away from her controlling husband. Halfway across the country, the plane crashes. Edward is the sole survivor.

Edward’s story captures the attention of the nation, but he struggles to find a place in a world without his family. He continues to feel that a part of himself has been left in the sky, forever tied to the plane and all of his fellow passengers. But then he makes an unexpected discovery—one that will lead him to the answers of some of life’s most profound questions: When
you’ve lost everything, how do you find the strength to put one foot in front of the other? How do you learn to feel safe again? How do you find meaning in your life?

*Dear Edward* is at once a transcendent coming-of-age story, a multidimensional portrait of an unforgettable cast of characters, and a breathtaking illustration of all the ways a broken heart learns to love again.

**Book Club Questions for Dear Edward**

- The story starts off when the Adler family arrives to Newark airport to board a flight from New Jersey to LA. It’s very mundane. But, we the readers, know that all the characters are soon heading to tragedy. Let’s talk about this opening chapter.

- The characters we meet in this chapter are: Bruce and Jane Alder (Edward’s parents); his brother Jordan; Crispin Cox, an elderly wealthy man; Linda Stollen, a young pregnant woman; Florida, a hippie woman running away from domestic life; Benjamin Stillman, a complicated military vet; Mark Lassio, a brash businessman and Veronica, a flight attendant. What was your initial impression of all these characters?

- The story alternates between the plane ride and the aftermath. What did you think about this writing style of the different timelines? Were you more engaged with one timeline over the other?

- After the crash, Edward stays with his aunt Lacey and Uncle John. But it’s a somewhat awkward and stilted dynamic. Let’s talk about their dynamic at the beginning of the novel. Do you think the constant grief and memories of loved ones is a reason why they all were so closed off to each other?

- Edward is depressed and can’t sleep. He goes to his next door neighbor’s house where Shay, a girl his age, lives and ends up sleeping on her floor for a long time. Why do you think Edward was more comfortable with Shay than being with anyone else?
• Let’s talk about the dynamics of Edward and Shay. How did they both find solace with each other?

• Of all the plane passengers, which storyline were you most engaged with? Which one the least?

• Gary, who is Linda’s boyfriend, drives across the country to meet with Edward. He hopes that maybe Edward had seen or interacted with Linda on the flight. After that, Edward and Shay discover hundreds of letters addressed to Edward from the family and spouses of loved ones who perished on the flight. This is a really key section so let’s break it down more. First, why do you think they all felt a need to write letters to Edward? What did Edward represent them?

• Why do you think it was important for the people to tell Edward to become what their loved ones couldn’t do (such as write a novel, move to London, become a standup comedian, etc.)? What they’re really asking for Edward is to continue their loved ones legacy—let’s talk about it.

• When Edward reads the letters, it’s understandably a lot but is also eventually provides a bit of closure for him. Why do you think those letters had that impact on him?

• Toward the end of the novel, Edward runs into his therapist and he mentions he still thinks about the crash all the time. His therapist says to him: “What happened to you is baked into your bones, Edward...what you’ve been working on, since the first time I met you, is learning to live with that.” Let’s discuss this.

• Edward and Shay eventually go back to the crash site in Colorado. We also learn of that future together. Let’s talk about the ending.

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About the Book

Dear Edward
by Ann Napolitano

What does it mean not just to survive, but to truly live?

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Dear Edward
by Ann Napolitano

June 12, 2013

7:45 a.m.

Newark Airport is shiny from a recent renovation. There are potted plants at each joint of the security line, to keep passengers from realizing how long they’ll have to wait. People prop themselves against walls or sit on suitcases. They all woke up before dawn; they exhale loudly, sputtering with exhaustion.

When the Adler family reaches the front of the line, they load their computers and shoes into trays. Bruce Adler removes his belt, rolls it up, and slots it neatly beside his brown loafers in a gray plastic bin. His sons are messier, throwing sneakers on top of laptops and wallets. Laces hang over the side of their shared tray, and Bruce can’t stop himself from tucking the loose strands inside.

The large rectangular sign beside them reads: All wallets, keys, phones, jewelry, electronic devices, computers, tablets, metal objects, shoes, belts, and food must go into the security bins. All drink and contraband must be thrown away.

Bruce and Jane Adler flank their twelve-year-old son, Eddie, as they approach the screening machine. Their fifteen-year-old son, Jordan, hangs back until his family has gone through.

Jordan says to the officer manning the machine: “I want to opt out.”

The officer gives him a look. “What’d you say?”

The boy shoves his hands in his pockets and says, “I want to opt out of going through the machine.”

The officer yells, apparently to the room at large: “We’ve got a male O--P-T!”

“Jordan,” his father says, from the far side of the tunnel. “What are you doing?”

The boy shrugs. “This is a full-body backscatter, Dad. It’s the most dangerous and least effective screening machine on the market. I’ve read about it and I’m not going through it.”

Bruce, who is ten yards away and knows he won’t be allowed to go back through the scanner to join his son, shuts his mouth. He doesn’t want Jordan to say another word.

“Step to the side, kid,” the officer says. “You’re holding up traffic.”

After the boy has complied, the officer says, “Let me tell you, it’s a whole lot easier and more pleasant to go through this machine than to
have that guy over there pat you down. Those patdowns are thorough, if you know what I mean."

The boy pushes hair off his forehead. He’s grown six inches in the last year and is whippet thin. Like his mother and brother, he has curly hair that grows so quickly he can’t keep it in check. His father’s hair is short and white. The white arrived when Bruce was twenty-seven, the same year Jordan was born. Bruce likes to point at his head and say to his son, Look what you did to me. The boy is aware that his father is staring intently at him now, as if trying to deliver good sense through the air.

Jordan says, "There are four reasons I’m not going through this machine. Would you like to hear them?"

The security officer looks amused. He’s not the only one paying attention to the boy now; the passengers around him are all listening.

"Oh God," Bruce says, under his breath.

Eddie Adler slips his hand into his mother’s, for the first time in at least a year. Watching his parents pack for this move from New York to Los Angeles—the Grand Upheaval, his father called it—gave him an upset stomach. He feels his insides grumble now and wonders if there’s a bathroom nearby. He says, "We should have stayed with him."

"He’ll be okay," Jane says, as much to herself as to her son. Her husband’s gaze is fixed on Jordan, but she can’t bear to look. Instead, she focuses on the tactile pleasure of her child’s hand in hers. She has missed this. So much could be solved, she thinks, if we simply held hands with each other more often.

The officer puffs out his chest. "Hit me, kid."

Jordan raises his fingers, ready to count. "One, I prefer to limit my exposure to radiation. Two, I don’t believe this technology prevents terrorism. Three, I’m grossed out that the government wants to take pictures of my balls. And four—he takes a breath—"I think the pose the person is forced to take inside the machine—hands up, like they’re being mugged—is designed to make them feel powerless and degraded."

The TSA agent is no longer smiling. He glances around. He’s not sure if this boy is making a fool of him.

Crispin Cox is in a wheelchair parked nearby, waiting for security to swab his chair for explosives. The old man has been stewing about this. Swab his wheelchair for explosives! If he had any spare breath in his lungs at all, he would refuse. Who do these idiots think they are? Who do they think he is? Isn’t it bad enough that he has to sit in this chair and travel with a nurse? He growls, "Give the boy his goddamn pat-down."

The old man has been issuing demands for decades and is almost never disobeyed. The tenor of his voice breaks the agent’s indecision like a black belt’s hand through a board. He points Jordan toward another officer, who tells him to spread his legs and stick out his arms. His family watches in dismay as the man moves his hand roughly between the boy’s legs.

"How old are you?" the officer asks, when he pauses to readjust his rubber gloves.

"Fifteen."

He makes a sour face. "Hardly ever get kids doing this."

"Who do you get?"
“Hippies, mostly.” He thinks for a moment. “Or people who used to be hippies.”

Jordan has to force his body to be still. The agent is feeling along the waistline of his jeans, and it tickles. “Maybe I’ll be a hippie when I grow up.”

“I’m finished, fifteen,” the man says. “Get out of here.”

Jordan is smiling when he rejoins his family. He takes his sneakers from his brother. “Let’s get going,” Jordan says. “We don’t want to miss our flight.”

“We’ll talk about that later,” Bruce says.

The two boys lead the way down the hall. There are windows in this corridor, and the skyscrapers of New York City are visible in the distance—man-made mountains of steel and glass piercing a blue sky. Jane and Bruce can’t help but locate the spot where the Twin Towers used to be, the same way the tongue finds the hole where a tooth was pulled. Their sons, who were both toddlers when the towers fell, accept the skyline as it is.

“Eddie,” Jordan says, and the two boys exchange a look.

The brothers are able to read each other effortlessly; their parents are often mystified to find that Jordan and Eddie have conducted an entire conversation and come to a decision without words. They’ve always operated as a unit and done everything together. In the last year, though, Jordan has been pulling away. The way he says his brother’s name now means: I’m still here. I’ll always come back.

Eddie punches his brother in the arm and runs ahead.

Jane walks gingerly. The hand dropped by her younger son tingles at her side.

At the gate, there is more waiting to do. Linda Stollen, a young woman dressed all in white, hurries into a pharmacy. Her palms are sweaty, and her heart thumps like it’s hoping to find a way out. Her flight from Chicago arrived at midnight, and she’d spent the intervening hours on a bench, trying to doze upright, her purse cradled to her chest. She’d booked the cheapest flight possible—hence the detour to Newark—and informed her father on the way to the airport that she would never ask him for money again. He had guffawed, even slapped his knee, like she’d just told the funniest joke he’d ever heard. She was serious, though. At this moment, she knows two things: One, she will never return to Indiana, and two, she will never ask her father and his third wife for anything, ever again.

This is Linda’s second pharmacy visit in twenty-four hours. She reaches into her purse and touches the wrapper of the pregnancy test she bought in South Bend. This time, she chooses a celebrity magazine, a bag of chocolate candies, and a diet soda and carries them to the cashier.

Crispin Cox snores in his wheelchair, his body a gaunt origami of skin and bones. Occasionally, his fingers flutter, like small birds struggling to take flight. His nurse, a middle-aged woman with bushy eyebrows, files her fingernails in a seat nearby.

Jane and Bruce sit side by side in blue airport chairs and argue, although no one around them would suspect it. Their faces are unflustered, their voices low. Their sons call this style of parental fight “DEFCON 4,” and it doesn’t worry them. Their parents are sparring, but it’s more about communication than combat. They are reaching out, not striking.
Bruce says, "That was a dangerous situation."

Jane shakes her head slightly. "Jordan is a kid. They wouldn't have done anything to him. He was within his rights."

"You're being naïve. He was mouthing off, and this country doesn't take kindly to that, regardless of what the Constitution claims."

"You taught him to speak up."

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