*Equipoise* book club questions

“The Last Thunderstorm Swim of the Summer”

* How does your impression of Ginny in the opening scenes compare with your understanding of her in the end? In what way is her transformation developed?
* What might thunderstorms represent in this story?
* Ginny tells Cici that Margot didn’t prepare her for sexual relationships. Do you agree or disagree with Ginny’s belief? In what way, might Margot have been modeling to her a way for women to be with men? In what way is this different than the way Josephine models?
* How does the geography of the story reflect Ginny’s gradual transformation?
* How does Cici and Ginny’s friendship compare with Margot and Josephine’s friendship?
* How would you describe the men — Eric and Mark — in this story? What kind of fathers are they? What kind of husbands are they?
* What variations of feminism are presented in this story? How would you define feminism both on a social and personal level?

“The Lifeboats”

* What is the significance of having the children sequestered upstairs while the adults remain downstairs in this story? How does the children’s imagined version of events echo or differ from the adults’ imagined version of events?
* From the beginning, the protagonist’s sister, Layla, seems in on an understanding that the protagonist is unable to see. What is that understanding? What is it that Layla understands Phoebe needs that the protagonist does not?
* What is the significance of Phoebe stating: “It’s *Captain*. I’m the captain, now.”
* What do you think happened to Mr. Thurber?
* Why do you think Phoebe’s mother married Mr. Thurber? What might the girls’ mother have meant when she said that Mrs. Thurber was “a spirited woman who had been forced into a bad situation”?
* Who is the protagonist most angry at when she says “…I hate them all for her. How selfish grown-ups can be! How careless. How they so often leave it all up to us?” What does she believe the adults have left up to the children in this story?
* What does it mean when she climbs up on the ‘whale’ with the rest of the children in the end?

“Honey Maiden”

* In the opening, what is your impression of David? What techniques are used to change your impression?
* What might the countryside versus the urban landscape signify in this story? In particular, what is the significance of the soil in the rural area of Ontario in which the story takes place?
* How would you describe David’s father? Is he a completely abhorrent character – or no?
* What do you think about Sally’s vision of David? How did she become captivated by him and how did she slowly come to see him as different than her initial view?
* What scenes in the story show us that Sally is deeply connected to the living world? How would you describe this connection?
* How would you describe Sally’s mother? How might it be that Sally’s mother’s way of being ultimately helps Sally decide what to do about David, even though she never directly suggests to Sally what she thinks Sally should do?
* In some ways, this story comments on ways in which different kinds of people fit into or feel excluded from both small rural towns and larger cities. Who is a character who feels she does not fit into the city versus a character who may feel she does not belong in a small rural town? How are these characters ultimately similar?
* What does David’s commitment to playing guitar tell us about his previous relationships?
* To understand the ending, we have to understand this line “I leave there lighter” found on the last page. Why does Sally leave there lighter? What has she left there for Muriel? Why? (hint: I almost called this story “The Honesty Box”.)

“House Calls”

* Much of this story is about Anna deluding herself into believing she has done nothing wrong. From the beginning, how do we hear Anna deluding herself?
* How does Anna interact with Tabitha and Stephanie? What is she looking for in them?
* Jayla is an important character because, as a child whom Anna cares for, she softens Anna’s façade somewhat. In what lines do we see this happening?
* Much of the story is about shame or embarrassment that grows underground in relationships. In fact, the words ‘embarassed’, ‘shame’, and ‘ashamed’ are repeated often in different contexts. Who is ashamed of what in this story? Who is not ashamed?
* How would you describe Anna’s upbringing in comparison to Anthony’s? What evidence is provided?
* What do you make of Anthony and Stepanie’s relationship? Are they in love? Do they get along? Are they a good team?
* If you had to tell a quick story about Anthony’s side of the demise of his friendship with Anna, how would it go?
* At one point, Anna reflects: “Truth to be told, though, a lot of people found it difficult to be easy around my mother. She was ahead of her time for this small town…” How do you think Anna’s mother shaped Anna’s current way of being? In what way is she similar to her mother and in what way is she different?
* Anna reflects on Anthony’s father that he “was in tune with his crops, could read their growth and decay.” How does this line also apply to Anna – but in the opposite, in that she is unable to read the growth and decay of something in her care?
* Consider this line: “I see it in the hospital now and then — factory men who put the work on, like a costume, and slowly lose themselves in the folds.” Who has been lost? Who has been found in ‘putting the work on like a costume’?

“Equipoise”

* Why might this story be shaped as it is: in the present, then further back, then further back again, then back to the present? How does moving in this direction affect our understanding of the main relationships in this story?
* How would you describe the relationship between Ren and Erin? Alex and Erin?
* How would you describe the shift in dynamics between the four friends over time?
* Though Erin is married to Brian, we spend more time focused on her relationship with Alex in this story – why is that? What is the message that is coming across regarding their bond? Do you think this diminishes or enhances the bond Erin has with Brian?
* In what ways does motherhood feel similar to Erin and Ren? In what ways might motherhood be approached differently by the two mothers?
* This story explores the often unexplored relationship we have in life to people we are connected with through marriage or romantic relationships — our partner’s best friend. What do you make of the exploration of this relationship? Do you have a relationship like this in your life? Have you viewed it in this way before or in a different way?
* What does ‘equipoise’ mean in terms of this story? In terms of this collection? How would you define it for yourself?

“The Critics”

* Who would you call the protagonist in this story and who would you call the antagonist? Does this alter over time or stay static for you?
* Skyla has a secret desire to become an actor, which remains hidden for much of the story — but what small clues show the reader this is what she has wanted all along?
* What do you make of Skyla’s relationship to her mother? What do you make of Audrey’s relationship to Skyla’s mother?
* What do you make of Audrey’s relationship to her mother? What do you make of Skyla’s relationship to Audrey’s mother? And why is it that these two girls find ways of connecting with each other’s mothers? Said differently, what kind of connection is each mother looking for with a daughter? What kind of connection is each daughter looking for with a mother?
* Skyla suffers from moderately severe acne. How does this impact her behaviours and personal life? How does it impact her relationship with her mother?
* At the end of the story, Audrey notes that she has lost touch with Josh, her other Halifax friends, and Lesley. Why do you think that is?
* Audrey changes greatly in this moment on p. 122: “…Audrey cut her off crisply, even severely: ‘*Of course.*’” The key thing here is the word ‘severely’ and the italics. Why?

“Progressive Dinner”

* Much of the story takes place with Charlotte on the front step of Kathleen’s house. She doesn’t enter the house until the end of the story. What is the significance of this?
* Why do you think Suzy is resistant to Charlotte?
* How does the weather and landscape play a role in this story? We see it all from Charlotte’s perspective — if we were to see the same weather and landscape through Suzy’s eyes or Charlotte’s eyes, would it be different?
* Charlotte is grieving the loss of her mother, but she is also grieving something else. Discuss.
* How does colour play an important role in this story?
* Consider the word “outside”. How does it serve multiple roles in this story?
* Why is it essential to Charlotte that the rest of Canada not be lumped in together, and that Briar Bay is not lumped in with Toronto? What matters to her here?
* If the story were retold from Suzy’s point of view, how might it sound?
* Do you think Charlotte should stay at the end, or return home?

“The Fly Swimmer”

* What do you make of Diana in this story? All things considered, has she been more harm or help to Sonia?
* “A little girl in a lavender polka-dotted bathing suit watched Sonia as the car glided past, and languidly, sweetly lifted a middle finger” (p. 145). What might this be symbolic of? Hint: if this girls represents Sonia’s inner child, what is she telling her adult self?
* How does Sonia’s vision of the Forest Schoolhouse clash with its reality?
* Bert’s name changes from Albert Jr. to Bert over the course of the story. What is he shedding?
* What is the truth of Bert’s home life? Why do you think Sonia is ultimately unable to hear the details?
* In Mr. Sendak’s office, Sonia sees a picture of his deceased wife. “There was some story about his wife having overdosed a decade ago, before he’d come to this school. All of a sudden the possible truth of this high school rumour was like a pin pushed into Sonia’s heart and she felt her body curl inward involuntarily” (p. 160). Why does she have this reaction in this moment?
* How would you describe Claire? Why do you think she is so unwelcoming toward Sonia?
* When Sonia has a panic attack in the car on the way home from school, she both discovers in that moment that Bert and Diana are having an affair and is comforted by Diana’s kindness which eases her attack. And later, Sonia remarks the ‘volume has been turned down on her anxiety’ ever since she realized Bert and Diana had an affair. What do you make of this?
* Sonia and Scott form an instant connection. What is it that draws them together and makes it easy for her to speak to him?
* If the story were to continue on, what do you think would happen next for Sonia and Bert?

“Glorious Kingdom”

* In the background of this story, there is a demonstration of environmental activism playing out. The aspect of danger slowly increases as the demonstration unfolds. What is Luke’s mother, Linda, grappling with in terms of her commitment to the environment and to her children?
* Luke is attuned to his mother’s emotions. He’s an observant child, but he doesn’t yet have the language to speak his observations in the way adults would expect. What lines exemplify this?
* Linda seems to make up her mind about her position on her role in this protest when speaking with the police officer. What lines indicate this?
* There is some symmetry in this story with “The Lifeboats”. In both, children are trying to interpret the adult world through their own imaginative play. Discuss.
* What do you make of Gloria’s relationship with her parents?
* What might Chalky represent in this story? Especially when Linda decides they will wait for him in the ending?
* One of the major themes of this story is how far parents are willing to go for their beliefs and values when children become involved – especially when fighting for those values begins to involve danger. What are your thoughts on this theme?

“Northern Tether”

* The friendship between Marion and Blythe is at the heart of this story. How would you describe this friendship? Is Marion overbearing and needy, or is she just very kind and generous? Is Blythe insensitive and hurtful, or is she just asserting some space from Marion and stepping into her own life? What do you make of Tomas? Is he unkind and selfish? Or is he thoughtful and good at asserting his boundaries?
* Marion has a deep love for chocolate and is surprised to find out Derek does too. What does this love represent? Why is she surprised Derek loves chocolate in the same way she does?
* Consider this moment: “Marion flexed her ankles and began to swish her legs along the cotton sheets, making a kind of sheet-angel; then she lay very still. So still that she decided she was about calcify. It had happened before. She made her arms move, peeled back each quilt.” What does it tell us about Marion’s state of being in the time before this story begins? How has she been doing?
* The colour purple reoccurs in this story. What might it represent?
* What is happening for Marion in this moment: “Marion startled when Blythe came back into the room; when she peeled the baby from Marion’s chest it felt as though she had stripped a line of duct tape off the pink tissue of Marion’s heart. It left a raw stripe” (p. 210).
* Why do you think the idea of climbing down into the rocky crevasse scares Marion? What does Derek understand about her when he says, “It’s just minerals and time, Marion” (p. 212).
* What is the significance of the em dash ( — ) in this line: “Maybe I could find some kind of contact information for you, so you can — so you can reach her” (p. 221). What begins to happen to Marion here?
* Later on that page, when Marion tells the voice on the phone “I’m so sorry”, what does she mean? What is she truly so sorry about?