



A SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Remembering What's Hidden

A Novel by Agenna Mathley

SEVEN SESSIONS

Before You Begin

This guide is built for groups reading *Remembering What's Hidden* together, whether in a church small group, a book club, or a handful of friends meeting around a kitchen table.

Each session covers several chapters and follows the same shape: **Teaching**, to set up what we're looking at; **Framework**, to name the idea underneath the story; **Exercise**, questions for real conversation; and **Pause**, one thing to carry into the week ahead.

The questions in each session tend to move in the same order: what you noticed in the text, what you think is happening underneath it, where you recognize it in your own life, and what it might change. No one has to answer every question personally. You are always welcome to talk about the characters rather than your own experience—often that's where the most honest conversation starts anyway.

Faith is present in this guide the way it's present in the book itself—real, but never required. An optional scripture connection appears at the end of some sessions for groups who want to go there. Nothing here assumes a particular faith background, and nothing requires one.

Read the full chapter range before each session. Come with whatever you noticed, not what you think you're supposed to say.

SESSION ONE

Fine: The Word We Hide Behind

Chapters One through Four

TEACHING

The book opens at the end—Ruth at a graveside, already changed, though we don't yet know how. From there we go back twenty months, to a moving truck and a house she didn't want.

FRAMEWORK

This is what the book calls the value got buried under function. What Ruth actually wants, needs, and feels doesn't disappear across these chapters. It gets buried under everything she's managing to keep the day moving forward.

EXERCISE

1. Looking back through the chapters, notice every place fine shows up. What pattern do you see in when Ruth reaches for it?
2. Ruth is genuinely competent. Where do you begin to see the difference between being capable and actually being okay?
3. Why do you think fine works so well for Ruth? What does the word protect her from—and what does it cost her?
4. Are there situations where you notice yourself giving the socially acceptable answer instead of the truest one? Why do you think we do that?

PAUSE

This week, offer someone the same small, unhurried presence Lindi offers Ruth in Chapter Three—cookies, one true sentence, no agenda. Notice what that costs you, and what it doesn't.

Optional: Psalm 139:1–14 speaks to being fully known. A group leaning toward faith conversation may want to sit with it here.

SESSION TWO

Showing Up in Small Ways

Chapters Five through Nine

TEACHING

Lindi keeps appearing—at the mailbox, at the coffee shop, at the sideline of a volleyball tournament—never with an agenda, always noticing something true. Then, in Chapter Nine, a grocery bag splits on the driveway, and for a moment there’s nothing to manage and nowhere to hide it.

FRAMEWORK

Presence isn’t the same thing as advice. Watch closely across these chapters for everything Lindi does not do.

EXERCISE

1. What does Lindi actually do for Ruth in these chapters? What does she deliberately not do?
2. Why do you think Lindi’s simple question—“Is that not your name?”—affects Ruth so deeply?
3. When has someone offered you presence instead of a solution? What made the difference?
4. The grocery bag breaks because it has been holding too much. Why do you think that image works so well for Ruth at this point in the story?

PAUSE

This week, try saying one true, plain sentence to someone, and then let yourself stop talking.

SESSION THREE

What the Body Knows

Chapters Ten through Fifteen

TEACHING

Caleb gets his own chapter here for the first time. Then, in Chapter Twelve, a routine doctor's visit turns up nothing—and everything. By Chapter Fourteen, it's two in the morning, and Ruth is reading research she has no business being awake for.

FRAMEWORK

The book draws a careful line between a stressor—the thing causing pressure—and stress, which is what the body does in response. Solving one doesn't always finish the other.

EXERCISE

1. Dr. Okafor tells Ruth that everything looks normal. Why is that both reassuring and frustrating to her?
2. What does Ruth begin to understand about the difference between solving a problem and actually recovering from it?
3. Caleb's chapter gives us access to a loneliness Ruth hasn't seen. What changes when the novel lets us see him from the inside?
4. Ruth begins paying attention to basic things she has treated as optional—sleep, water, movement, quiet. Why do capable people sometimes find it easier to care for everyone else than to respond to their own needs?

PAUSE

Before you solve the next problem that lands on your desk, ask Ruth's question first: do I actually feel better right away, in my body? Just notice the answer.

Optional: Psalm 34:18 speaks to nearness in a broken or crushed spirit—worth reading aloud for a group ready to go deeper here.

SESSION FOUR

Learning to Notice

Chapters Sixteen through Nineteen

TEACHING

At a volleyball game, Ruth watches her daughter Sloane’s face close over disappointment in under a second—and recognizes the motion immediately. By Chapter Nineteen, Ruth finally looks up the meaning of her own name.

FRAMEWORK

We inherit more than features from our parents. We inherit patterns—including the ones we worked hardest to hide.

EXERCISE

1. What exactly does Ruth recognize when she watches Sloane “reset” her face? Why is seeing it in Sloane different from recognizing it in herself?
2. Ruth never intentionally taught Sloane to say fine. So how did Sloane learn it? What does the scene suggest about the things families teach without ever saying it aloud?
3. What patterns can be passed through a family without anyone deliberately choosing them?
4. Ruth begins reclaiming her name in this section. Why do you think identity becomes important at the same point she is beginning to notice her patterns?

PAUSE

If you’re willing, look up what your own name means before your next session. Don’t share it yet. Just notice what it stirs.

SESSION FIVE

Reaching and Turning Away

Chapters Twenty through Twenty-Five

TEACHING

In a waiting room, Ruth offers a stranger the exact presence Lindi has been offering her. Then the book turns toward Ruth's marriage directly. In Chapter Twenty-Five, Ruth reads about bids for connection, and realizes Caleb has been making them for years.

FRAMEWORK

A bid can be as small as a hand across a table, or the words look at this. What matters isn't the size of the bid. It's whether it gets turned toward, or missed.

EXERCISE

1. Before Ruth learns the term bid for connection, which of Caleb's earlier reaches do you remember? Did you recognize them as important when they first happened?
2. Why do you think Ruth missed so many of Caleb's bids even though she loved him?
3. What are some small ways people ask for connection without actually saying, "I need you"?
4. Is there one kind of bid you tend to miss because it doesn't look like a request for connection to you?

PAUSE

This week, notice one bid for connection someone makes toward you—a small one—and turn toward it on purpose.

Leader's optional question: Sloane learns to ask herself, do I actually want this, or do I want how this looks? Where in your own life does that question become useful?

SESSION SIX

What Gets Passed Down

Chapters Twenty-Six and Twenty-Seven

TEACHING

Caleb tells his son CJ the story of three generations of names, all carrying the same initials, none of them handed down directly. Then Lindi tells Ruth about Eleanor, and the whole book reorganizes around one fact: Lindi has been talking about her mother the entire time.

FRAMEWORK

Fine for forty years is not a coincidence of language in this book. It's the whole point.

EXERCISE

1. Once you know who Eleanor was to Lindi, which earlier scene or sentence from Lindi reads differently to you?
2. How did Lindi turn something she could not change about her mother's life into the way she chose to live her own?
3. Caleb tells CJ that what was passed down wasn't really the initials—it was “the shape of it.” What do you think he means?
4. What gets passed through families besides names, possessions, and genetics? Which kinds of inheritance are worth keeping—and which might need to stop with us?

PAUSE

This week, ask someone older in your life one honest question about what they carried, and actually listen to the whole answer.

Optional: Lindi's kindness toward Ruth makes more sense once you learn what she'd lost. Has someone's kindness toward you ever landed differently once you understood what shaped it?

SESSION SEVEN

Coming Full Circle

Chapters Twenty-Eight and Twenty-Nine

TEACHING

Eight months pass in a handful of pages. Then it's June, and Ruth is back at the coffee shop with Claire, telling the whole story out loud for the first time. The book ends where it began: the graveside. But when Ruth sees a stranger doing the same quiet collapse she once did, she doesn't hesitate. She crosses the distance.

FRAMEWORK

The book's final image answers its opening one. Ruth spent the whole story learning to receive what Lindi gave her. In the last pages, she becomes the one who gives it.

EXERCISE

1. What do you think the title means now? What was hidden—and what does remembering have to do with finding it again?
2. At the beginning of the book we were told, “Fine is the most expensive word in the English language.” After reading Ruth's story, what did fine actually cost her?
3. Ruth does not become Lindi. What has she taken from Lindi, and what has become distinctly Ruth's?
4. What changed in Ruth that finally made her capable of telling Claire the truth about her life without needing to make herself look better in the telling?
5. Why do you think the novel ends with Ruth approaching one woman rather than starting a program, gathering a group, or building a following?

PAUSE

Ruth's last act in the book is small: she starts the car, and she is not in a hurry. This week, let yourself do one ordinary thing without rushing it. Notice what that's like.

Optional: Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 speaks to what it means to be lifted up by another—worth closing your group's discussion here, if that fits.

Closing Note

If your group finishes this book and finds yourselves wanting to keep going, the questions underneath every session are really just one question, asked from different angles:

What have you been calling fine that deserves a truer name?

That question doesn't end when the book does.