



Book Club Questions

Bylines and Blessings

1. In her author's note, Judy Gruen says that Jewish faith values helped her plan not just a career but a life: "They kept my priorities straight when ego and ambition threatened to get the better of me." How important are faith or other personal values in building a career and a meaningful life?
2. In the chapter "My Fifteen Minutes of Writing About Fame," Gruen recalls working in a temporary office job and getting so consumed with work that she forgot to pick up her kids at carpool. She was also mortified to discover she's been replaced by a younger, more fashionable woman with a condescending attitude. What did this story say about the author's conflict between her identities as a mother and as a professional?
3. Despite her growing stature as a writer, in mid-career Gruen remained frustrated at her lack of commercial success. A pivotal moment came when a spiritual mentor asked her, "Where is the blessing coming from in your work?" What made this question so clarifying for her? Is this a question everyone should consider asking themselves?
4. The author shared a short letter her grandfather sent her when she was a young child, encouraging her to remain optimistic in life despite hard times. While written to an audience of one, the letter's power stayed with her and strongly influenced her approach to all of life, including messages she has shared with her audience. In the era of easy publishing, social media posts, texting, and entertainment overload, have we as a society lost the respect for the power of words?
5. Did any of the author's stories of tenacity in the face of professional disappointments inspire you in any way? If so, how?
6. When Gruen's first book was published shortly before her mother died and shortly before 9/11, she questioned the value of continuing to write humor. But after a seriously ill woman wrote to tell her that laughing at one of her articles "saved her life," and her rabbi urged her to keep going, she decided that humor was not a luxury, but a life tool. Have you ever turned to humor as a calming force when dealing with painful situations in your life?

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7. As she felt increasingly out of step with the politics of the larger community of writers, Gruen challenged the head of the Authors Guild over some of the organization's positions. While grateful for the dialogue, she didn't expect anything to change. In today's polarized society, is there value in debating people whose views differ so radically from your own?
8. In the chapter "Boundaries," Gruen criticizes the oversharing done by some writers for the sake of a byline, particularly when parents write about children and their problems. Drama sells, but do the people being written about have the right to refuse to have stories about them published?
9. At the beginning of the chapter "Column Fodder on Aisle 9," Gruen quotes Joyce Carol Oates advising, "Write your heart out." Throughout this memoir, it's clear that the author never loses the thrill and satisfaction of writing. How important is it to find joy in your work?
10. In the final chapter, the author admits that work-life balance still eludes her, even as a grandmother. She revels in the "joyful chaos" of family life while still writing as often as she can. Given her relentless ambition for additional bylines, was this growth/transformation believable?
11. What stories or chapters were especially memorable? Which stories stayed with you after you finished the book?

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