



## Discussion Guide for Book Clubs

This story began when I came across Alice Gregory’s article, “The Sorrow and the Shame of the Accidental Killer,” in the September 11, 2017 issue of *The New Yorker*. Gregory describes the grief and guilt that cling to everyday people who have unintentionally caused catastrophic injury or death. Soldiers are very familiar with this concept

of moral injury, the anguish that a caring person feels when they’ve acted—or failed to act—in a way that violates their moral compass.

In *Drawn from Life*, the main character is Emma Gillen, a shy young woman who believes she’s caused a tragic accident by getting behind the wheel of her car when she shouldn’t have. She was never charged with a crime, but she’s convinced she’s somehow caused the deaths of two children and their mother. Memory loss heightens her grief—if she can’t remember what she did to cause the crash, how can she atone for it?

The story would be stuck there—as Emma is stuck—if not for Emma’s cousin Lucy, who relies on other people’s trust and money to support her lifestyle. The two women are bound by family ties and an uneasy co-dependency rooted in their shared past.

As I explored the questions raised by Lucy’s sudden departure after the accident and her abrupt return eight years later as Lyssa, I re-ignited their conflict to bring Emma’s internal struggle to a larger confrontation.

I’d love to hear what you think about Emma’s story. Thank you for reading *Drawn from Life*.

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### Discussion Guide Questions

1. Story, character, settings, writing style. What are your favorite parts of this story?
2. What surprised you about the plot? Were there twists you didn’t see coming?
3. Much of this story revolves around Emma’s search for redemption. But what about Lucy/Lyssa? Is she an unredeemable narcissist or can she also be rescued?
4. Emma uses several strategies to cope with her shame, including writing letters to the crash victims. She also volunteers as a model for figure-drawing classes. Her father disapproves, calling it “picking at scabs and obsessing over her guilt.” What are your thoughts?
5. Consider Chaz. When he appeared as a young farm worker in Chapter 5, what were your expectations? How did they change?
6. What about Koa? What role does he play? Is this what you expected?
7. How do you feel about the ending? What did you like or dislike, and why? Did Emma do the right thing?
8. What aspects of Emma’s life resonate with your lived experience?