

So Many Ways to Begin

By Jon McGregor

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *So Many Ways to Begin*, a meditative novel about the limits of self-discovery within a family full of secrets.

About this book

David Carter has always been a collector. Born at the end of World War II to a loving family, he grew up salvaging treasures from bomb sites in Coventry, building miniature museums to preserve histories and tell stories about his past. David eventually lands his dream job as a curator at the Coventry Museum, and he even meets his dream girl: Eleanor, an aspiring geologist from Aberdeen, Scotland. As they fall in love, David and Eleanor's future seems limitless.

But David's tidy world quickly falls apart. His mother's best friend, succumbing to senility, innocently mentions that David was adopted—his real mother was a young Irish girl who disappeared right after his birth. David's and Eleanor's lives unravel in the wake of this revelation. Eleanor leaves Scotland for good, and the radical break from her family threatens her sanity. David is almost lured into an affair with a co-worker, and he barely escapes with his life. As David and Eleanor settle into compromised versions of their dream lives, they raise a daughter who will eventually leave them, just as they once left their own families. As David learns to live his life rather than to curate it, he slowly comes to terms with all that is unknowable in the past, and all that is insecure in the future.

For discussion

1. *So Many Ways to Begin* opens with a prologue about Mary Friel's ill-fated journey from Ireland to Hampstead. How does this prologue set the scene for the novel to come? What does Mary Friel's story reveal about David Carter's story, and what does it conceal?
2. The novel's chapters are organized by artifacts within David's collection. How do these artifacts shape the story of David's life? Which of these relics gives the fullest picture of a stage of David's life? To whom does David imagine telling his story through these objects?
3. Consider the relationship between David and Dorothy. Why does Dorothy insist to Julia that when David was a baby, "I couldn't take my eyes off him; I couldn't put him down for more than a minute" (31)? When Dorothy explains in her letter to David, "I chose to keep you" (343), how does that clarify her feelings for him? What pieces of their shared history has David neglected in his search for family?
4. Discuss David's lifelong fascination with collecting and curating objects. Why is he drawn to objects that say, "This is some small piece of where I began" (34)? How does David's urge to collect relate to the uncertainty of his origins?

5. Consider the setting of the novel: Coventry, England, from 1943 to 2000. How does Coventry look and feel in the novel? How does the town grow and change in David's lifetime?
6. As Aunt Julia teaches young David to dance, she reminisces about her brief marriage to Major William Pearson during World War II. Why does Julia describe her courtship and marriage as taking place over a single dance? What does Julia's story imply about the workings of memory and mourning?
7. "I'm going to be a geologist," Eleanor tells David when they meet (68). How do Eleanor's career aspirations compare to David's? Where do their areas of study overlap and diverge?
8. Julia, Dorothy, and David all cope with romances fraught with separations, whether due to war, death, or distant borders. How does each character handle a long-distance romance? Which love stories turn out well, and which are doomed to sadness?
9. Discuss the scene in which Aunt Julia tells David the story of his birth. How does the secret come to light? How does David handle this moment of revelation, and how does Dorothy? What regrets do David and Dorothy express when the truth comes out, and how do they eventually reconcile?
10. Consider Eleanor's relationship with her parents, Ivy and Stewart. What are the roots of the conflict between Ivy and Eleanor? What is Stewart's role within this tense household? How does Eleanor's family history influence her relationship with her daughter, Kate, which David calls "uneventful" (316)?
11. When David starts searching for his birth mother, "He discovered that history's secrets are not always easily found, that all the archives in the world weren't enough when he didn't even know who or what he was looking for, or where he should be looking" (128). Discuss the phases of David's search for Mary Friel. Which clues help David in his search, and which lead him down the wrong path? How does the Internet change the direction of his quest?
12. As David reels from learning the secret of his birth, he believes that Eleanor "doesn't keep any secrets from" him (153). Does Eleanor seem to divulge everything to David? Or might she keep some secrets of her own? Explain.
13. Consider David's career path at Coventry Museum, from his beginnings as a junior curatorial assistant in 1964 to his layoff in 1986. What career goals does David have as a young man? How does he handle career setbacks, including Anna's promotion and his layoff?

14. David never tells Eleanor the secret of his dangerous entanglement with Anna and Chris. What is the impact of the secret upon David and Eleanor's marriage? Does keeping a secret of his own help David understand Dorothy's secrets? Why or why not?
15. Consider David and Eleanor's trip to Donegal to meet Mary Friel. What changes when Mary tells David, "Most girls would have given false names to the nurses, you know" (359)? Why does this false name end David's search? How does his lovemaking with Eleanor in the novel's final scene suggest another kind of beginning?
16. Discuss the meaning of the title *So Many Ways to Begin*. What various possibilities of beginnings does the novel put forth? When does the author propose multiple beginnings, and why? What ending does the novel also explore?

Suggested reading

Jon McGregor, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*; Ian McEwan, *Solar* and *On Chesil Beach*; John Banville, *The Sea*; David Nicholls, *One Day*; W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*; Nicole Krauss, *Great House*; David Mitchell, *Black Swan Green*; Maile Meloy, *Both Ways Is the Only Way I Want It*; Ron Currie Jr., *Everything Matters!*; J. M. Coetzee, *Summertime*.

Jon McGregor lives in Nottingham, England. His first novel, *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things*, was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize, shortlisted for the Times Young Writer Award, and won the Betty Trask Prize and the Somerset Maugham Awards. *So Many Ways to Begin* was also longlisted for the Man Booker Prize. His most recent novel is *Even the Dogs*.