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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

Something for the Pain

by

Paul Austin

(New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008)

Author:

Paul Austin's essays have appeared in *Creative Nonfiction*, *The Southeast Review*, and *The Gettysburg Review*. A former firefighter, he has more than twenty years of experience working in emergencies. He lives in Durham. [From the book jacket]

Summary:

With a relentlessly honest look at modern emergency medicine, Austin, a former firefighter now living in Durham, N.C., writes in his debut book of his transformation to a highly capable ER doctor struggling to stay one jump ahead of death in the crowded critical care ward. The book begins deftly with Austin, a sleep-deprived physician, trying to avoid mistakes stemming from fatigue by relying on his instincts, frequently both skill and luck, to treat patients with gunshot wounds, brain tumors, asthma, heart ailments and general problems. In a narrative blur of flashbacks, he tells of his career as a firefighter before landing in medical school, which was followed by an internship at a local hospital and marriage to a lovely nurse and having a family. What makes this inspiring medical memoir stand out is the courageous measure of Austin's humanity in taking on the endless weight of suffering, and what he becomes to his co-workers, his patients, his family and his community. [From Publishers Weekly]

Questions:

1. If you have had a prior experience of ER treatment, think of that time. How would you react in that situation now after seeing it from Dr. Austin's viewpoint in this book?
2. At the beginning of the book, Dr. Austin was taught about the caring curve. This was a graph showing how empathy for the patient changed over time from a high as a premed student to a low after residency before rising again after the doctor starts his practice but never returning to the high as a premed student. In what ways did you see Dr. Austin go through this curve?
3. Think about TV shows you have seen about doctors, especially ER doctors. In what ways did this book differ from those TV shows? In what ways was it similar? Which one do you think is more accurate?

4. Dr. Austin wrote about his interaction with his family and problems created by his work. What are some ways that he dealt with this stress, both good and bad?
5. In the second part of the book, Dr. Austin moved to Durham and mentioned the city in both a good light and a bad one. What ways do you remember? Was he fair in his descriptions? How do you think someone reading this book in California would view Durham?
6. Dr. Austin decided to work in the ER instead of as a surgeon because he felt they were happier, cooler, got more time off, had more varied work and were more of an all-around doctor. How does this match your view of an ER doctor?
7. If you have ever worked a job with a rotating shift or with hours that were not the typical 9-5, what were your techniques for handling those hours?
8. One patient mentioned in the book was Mr. Kelly. He was the patient who Dr. Austin sent home but who came back later in cardiac arrest and died. What was Dr. Austin's reaction in this case? Would you have reacted as he did?
9. If you have known someone with Down Syndrome, do you think this book portrays him or her accurately? Why or why not?
10. The book was written as a personal narrative. Do you think the book would have been as effective if it had been presented using a different approach, such as fiction?
11. The chapter called Sleeping Quarters varied from the other chapters in the book because it provided some comical moments and a release from the tension of the previous chapters. Were there other moments you found in the book like this?
12. Was there a particular patient that you remember from the book that struck a chord with you either good or bad?