

Golden State Reading Group Guide

Golden State is a haunting novel by Stephanie Kegan about the choices we make, the loyalties we owe our families, and how fragile the foundations of an ordinary life can be. A fifth-generation Californian and the youngest of three children, Natalie enjoys an idyllic view of her past and a happy present as a wife, mother and teacher. Then the unthinkable happens: Natalie is thrust into overnight notoriety when her beloved but erratic older brother is accused of committing a series of heinous crimes. Natalie is forced to make decisions that pit her loyalty to brother, sister and mother against her need to protect her husband and children. Uncertain where her choices will lead, Natalie must endure the harsh judgment of the national media as she comes to terms with her past and a future she never imagined.

Discussion Questions:

1. In the opening of the novel, Natalie thinks that there is no special day of remembrance, “no sad sweet mourning for those who were not dead but simply gone.” (pg.2) What do you think Natalie means by this? How has the absence of her brother impacted her life? When a close family member changes radically from the person you knew, does it change your feelings for him or her? If so, why and in what ways?
2. Natalie’s discovery places her in a crushing moral dilemma. If you suspected a family member of committing a crime, how would you react? Discuss the possibilities with your book group.
3. The crisis that befalls Natalie and Eric produces a rift in their marriage that comes to a head when Eric refuses to go on *60 Minutes* with Natalie. What do you think about Eric’s stance? And Natalie’s? Is her loyalty misplaced? Would Eric think differently if it were his brother in jeopardy? Throughout the crisis, Natalie is torn between the needs of her family with Eric, and what her mother, sister and brother need from her. What do you think of the way she handles this dilemma? Whose position do you most identify with and why?
4. Discuss what you think about Natalie’s mother and her relationship with Natalie. In what ways do you think Bobby impacted their relationship? Do you think the mother bears any blame for the situation with Bobby? If so, why? Natalie and Bobby have very different views of their father. What is your view of the father and his role in the family’s difficulties?
5. Natalie says, “I came from a long line of dreamers, of story tellers, and the most dangerous stories we told were about ourselves. (pg. 180) What does Natalie means by this? What are the dangerous stories Natalie tells herself? At one point in the novel, she seeks forgiveness from a victim’s mother. How does this behavior reflect the story she tells herself? What were the dangerous stories other members of her family told? Could what happened in Natalie’s family happen to any family, or was hers in some way unique?
6. Natalie tells her daughter Julia that mental illness isn’t like the chicken pox. “It can be really hard to see in your own family.” (pg.173) Do you think there was an active denial of Bobby’s mental illness in Natalie’s family, and if so, why? What is the role that each family member played in the denial? If they had been able to confront Bobby’s mental illness, would the story have had a

different outcome? Discuss whether you think the family bears any responsibility in the case of a mentally ill family member who commits a terrible crime. Why are families slow to recognize the signs of mental illness, opting to stay in denial even when a loved one exhibits behavior harmful to himself? Is there anything we can or should do as a society to help a family in this situation?

7. How do you think Natalie's family history impacts her relationship with her daughters? Once Bobby is arrested, Natalie is in the difficult position of explaining this situation to her children. If you were facing her situation, how would you handle it? At what point in your family history would you begin? How would your explanation differ depending on the ages of the children? Did you agree with the way Natalie framed it to her daughters?

8. Natalie seems to be a person who guards her privacy. She tells us that she "tore the address labels from magazines I discarded because I was afraid of strangers knowing too much." (pg. 90) Yet she speaks about her family and their history to a reporter from *Time*. What do think about that decision? What do you think in general about her decisions to appear in the media and what that says about her? The media plays a substantial role in *Golden State*. How did the media influence or manipulate public opinion during the course of Bobby's trial?

9. Natalie and Sarah have a very complex relationship. How does their relationship grow and change throughout the narrative? Do they seem more accepting of each other? Do you believe they will continue their relationship once the trial is over, and if so, why?

10. Discuss Natalie's decision to take the stand. What influenced this decision, and how did she feel about it? How do you think you would feel if you had to make a similar choice?

11. Our society is fascinated by criminal trials, and notorious cases are frequently discussed on the news and in other media. Why do you believe this is the case? Have you ever followed a national trial closely? If yes, why? What do you believe this fascination says about our collective values?

12. On page 288, Natalie learns that some mainstream thinkers had dared to say that while they abhorred Bobby's tactics, they thought "his critique of contemporary society was dead on." (pg 218) What do you think of Bobby's critique of contemporary society? Can you, for example, relate to Bobby's desire to live in a world with less technology? Do you think that the devices of technology have caused us to lose any personal freedom?

Enhance Your Book Club:

1. *Golden State* delves into Natalie's family's history and explores her relationship with her native state. Explore your family's history, why your forebears came to live where they did, as well as your relationship with where you live. Interview older family members, research your lineage and uncover three or four facts you never knew about. Share your findings with your book club.
2. Challenge yourself to a technology detox. Try to go 24 hours without your cellphone, internet, or television. How did this experience affect your daily routine? How did it make you feel? Did this experiment leave you with a better sense of technology's impact your daily life?