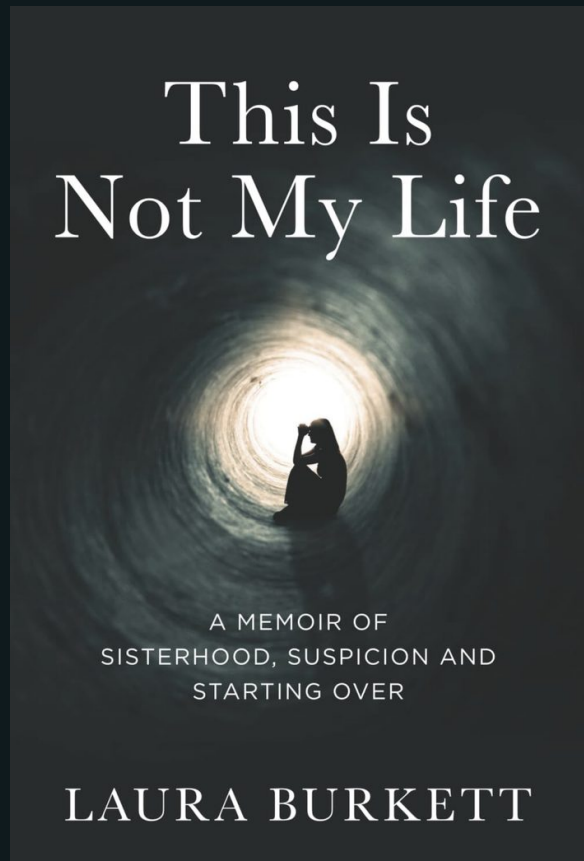


Book club guide



This Is Not My Life

A memoir of sisterhood, suspicion, and starting over

by **Laura Burkett**

Reading plans, discussion questions, activities, and care notes for your group

Welcome, book club

Thank you for choosing *This Is Not My Life* for your group. It is a funny, raw, and heartbreaking memoir about two sisters, one family, and the questions that follow a sudden loss. This guide gives you everything you need to talk about it well, and you can use as much or as little as you like.

What is inside

Plan your reading. Schedules for one, two, three, or five meetings, built around the book's own turning points, plus a chapter companion with heads-ups.

Part One: before you read. Icebreakers and ten spoiler-free questions that work at any stage.

Part Two: section by section. Questions for each part of the book, with spoilers only through the chapters you have read.

Part Three: after you finish. Big-picture questions about truth, humor, family, and the ending.

Part Four: make it an evening. Activities, quote cards, and host tips to turn a discussion into an experience.

Care and resources. A full content note, ground rules, and support lines, because this story touches real loss.

How to use it

Pick four to six questions for a typical meeting and let the conversation wander. Every question can stand alone, and you never have to go in order. Spoilers are marked, so your group can decide how much to share before everyone has finished.

A tip for hosts

Start with one word. Go around the room and ask each person for a single word that describes how the book left them feeling. It takes two minutes and gets everyone talking.

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About the book and author

Everything you need to introduce the book in two minutes.

The book

This Is Not My Life: A Memoir of Sisterhood, Suspicion, and Starting Over begins with a phone call on a December evening in 2002, then goes back to explain how Laura Burkett's sister, Danielle, lived. In the months that follow, Laura is a sister, a mother, and a wife who starts asking questions no one wants to hear. It is raw, unflinching, and darkly humorous: at once a detective story, a love letter to sisterhood, and a testament to resilience.

Author	Laura Burkett
Genre	Memoir
Publisher	Sevan House Publishing
Length	244 pages in print, 31 chapters
Setting	Western Pennsylvania, with trips to Nashville and Toronto
Time frame	2002 to the late 2000s
ISBN (paperback)	979-8-9986322-0-4



Laura Burkett

The author

Laura Burkett spent decades as a silent spectator to life's chaos before finally putting her story into words. Her debut memoir has earned 4.8 stars from readers on Amazon, and she recently gave the keynote at the Women Rising Summit in Canfield, Ohio. She lives outside of Pittsburgh with a mug that reads "Be careful or you'll end up in my book."

Why it works for book clubs

It is short enough for a month and funny enough to keep people reading. Every member will find a way in: a sibling, a parent, a friend who showed up, a dream put away in a drawer. And because the story refuses a tidy ending, there is always something left to argue about.

A note before you meet

This is a true story about real people, and it deserves a careful welcome.

Content note

This memoir deals with the sudden death of the author's sister and a friend, a suspicious death and a police investigation that ended without answers, an abusive marriage, mental illness, suicide (a teenage threat and a brief moment of suicidal thinking), and unwanted physical advances. It is also darkly funny. Consider sharing this note with your group ahead of time, so members can choose how to read.

Ground rules that help

Share what you want, and no more. Nobody has to tell a personal story to take part.

What is said in the room stays in the room. Say it out loud at the start.

Name the heavy chapters. The chapter companion marks them, and members can skip or skim without missing the story.

Make room for laughing. Laura calls inappropriate humor her hiding place. Laughing during the hard parts is part of the book, not a failure of respect.

Talk about the people in the book as people. The book names no verdict, so please do not name one for it. Stay with what the book shows and what it makes you feel.

If the book brings up something hard

In the United States, you can call or text **988** for the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time. The National Domestic Violence Hotline is **1-800-799-7233**, or text **START** to **88788**. A doctor, counselor, or faith leader can also help with grief that feels too heavy to carry alone.

Plan your reading

The book is organized here into five sections, each with its own questions in Part Two. Combine them to fit your group.

Section	Title	Chapters	Length
A	Danielle's world	Chapters 1 to 11	about 45 pages
B	The last days	Chapters 12 to 19	about 35 pages
C	Asking questions	Chapters 20 to 23	about 35 pages
D	Finding herself	Chapters 24 to 29	about 40 pages
E	Starting over	Chapters 30 and 31	about 80 pages

Choose a schedule

Plan	Meeting	Read	About
One meeting	1	The whole book (all five sections)	235 pages
Two meetings	1	Sections A to C (Chapters 1 to 23)	115 pages
	2	Sections D and E (Chapters 24 to 31)	120 pages
Three meetings	1	Sections A and B (Chapters 1 to 19)	80 pages
	2	Sections C and D (Chapters 20 to 29)	75 pages
	3	Section E (Chapters 30 and 31)	80 pages
Five meetings	1 to 5	One section per meeting, A through E	35 to 80 pages each

Page counts are approximate and vary by edition, so go by the chapter titles in the chapter companion.

Which plan should we pick?

Most groups enjoy the **three-meeting plan**. It puts each meeting at a natural turning point and keeps the reading to about 80 pages at a time. A single meeting works well for a group that likes to read ahead and talk once, and the five-meeting plan suits a weekly or lunch-hour group.

Chapter companion

All 31 chapters, grouped into sections, with a short heads-up wherever a chapter is heavier.

No.	Chapter	Heads-up
Section A: Danielle's world		
1	The Phone Call	Sudden death
2	How's Your Sister and Fidel Castro?	A brief teenage suicide threat
3	Stop Taking Your Sister's Clothes!	
4	It's a Wonder We Are Not Strippers	Parental anger; mention of guns
5	Laura, Your Grandpa's on Fire	
6	Men	A teenager's relationship with an adult
7	Superheroes	Emergency scene; death
8	I Have Never Seen an Ambulance Drive That Fast	A drowning; emergency scene
9	Independence Day	A spouse's angry outburst
10	One Kind of Happy Family Again	
11	Ferris Bueller	
Section B: The last days		
12	Welcome Aboard the Bi-Polar Express	Mental illness
13	Just Call Diane Warren	
14	Crazytown	Threats; an unwanted advance described
15	The Hospital	Hospital scenes; life support
16	The Long Ride	Hospital scenes; life support
17	Nobody Said it Out Loud	Grief; funeral planning
18	Semper Fidelis	Grief; funeral
19	It's Like I'm Brain Dead	Funeral; a passing mention of suicide
Section C: Asking questions		
20	True Friends Come Out In Their Slippers	Police investigation; drinking
21	O' Canada	Harassing calls from a spouse
22	Taking the Bridge	Domestic violence; suicidal thinking
23	Grand Theft Rabbit	
Section D: Finding herself		
24	Nashville...	

No.	Chapter	Heads-up
25	The Baggy Knee	Investigation; exhumation discussed
26	Quality, Value, Convenience	
27	Sybill	Controlling marriage; therapy
28	Single Mom	Divorce
29	Paperwork	Autopsy findings
Section E: Starting over		
30	Nashville... Part III	An unwanted physical advance; infidelity
31	Peace	Loss of a home; family conflict

Part One

Before you read

Spoiler-free questions for any stage

“This is not my life.”

Part One: before you read

SPOILER-FREE. These questions work before, during, or after reading.

Icebreakers

1. In one word, how did you feel when you decided to read this book?
2. Do you have a sibling or a chosen sibling? What is one thing they would correct about how you tell your own stories?
3. What is a family story that gets told at every holiday?
4. When was the last time you laughed at a moment you were not supposed to?
5. Before reading, what did you expect a book called *This Is Not My Life* to be about?

Ten questions to talk about

Spoiler-free, and written from the book itself.

1 **Trust in memoir**
Laura admits her sister would be “making additions, omissions, or corrections” if she were here to read this. How does that admission affect how much you trust Laura as a narrator?

2 **Wants and shoulds**
Laura says her sister lived in the land of the wants while she lived in the land of the shoulds. Which land do you live in, and what did each choice cost and give?

3 **Labels**
From age twelve, Laura is “the sister of the girl that...” What labels follow people in a small town, and how much of who we become is a reaction to them?

4 **Humor**
Laura calls inappropriate humor her “hiding place.” Did the humor help you stay with the hardest parts of this story, or did it complicate how you felt?

5 **Grief and questions**
When Laura voices her suspicions, some friends tell her to “let this go.” What do we owe someone who is grieving and asking questions no one wants to hear?

6 **Friendship**
A chapter title says that true friends “come out in their slippers.” Who showed up for Laura, who did not, and who has shown up in their slippers for you?

7 **Parents**
Laura’s father taught her “Swim or die.” Which lessons from your own parents did you only recognize years later, as a gift, a wound, or both?

8 **Dreams**
Laura’s songs sit in a piano bench for years until her sister pushes her to open it. What dream have you put away, and who in your life pushes you to take it out?

9 **Coping with loss**
Laura says grief can push us to “try to self-destruct” in more than one way. Which ways did you recognize in the book, and which in your own life?

10 **The refrain**
“This is not my life” returns throughout the book. What do you think it means to Laura at the start, and what does it mean to you by the end?

Part Two

Section by section

Questions with spoilers through each section

“Live every moment, even the really dumb ones.”

Section A: Danielle's world

SPOILERS through the end of Chapter 11.

-
- A1** **Structure**
The book opens with a phone call, then goes back to explain how Danielle lived. Why do you think Laura built it this way, and how did it change the way you read the first chapter?
-
- A2** **Father**
Laura's father is tough and volatile, and he raised his daughters to "Swim or die." What do you see of him in each sister, and in the family's humor?
-
- A3** **Danielle**
Danielle runs away at fifteen, flies planes, and leaps a counter to protect her son. Which of her stories made you laugh, which made you worry, and what does Laura admire and resent about her?
-
- A4** **First loss**
A close friend drowns in Danielle's pool six months before her own death. How did each sister cope with that first loss, and what did you notice about how the family explained it?
-
- A5** **Control**
For a year, Laura's husband keeps her from her sister. What did you notice about control in that marriage, and about how Laura explains staying?
-
- A6** **Family portrait**
The family portrait chapter is a comic disaster. What can a funny family story reveal about love that a serious one cannot?
-

Section B: The last days

SPOILERS through the end of Chapter 19.

B1 Closeness

By December 2002 the sisters have finally become close. How did knowing that change the way you felt as the book moved toward the loss?

B2 Nashville

Danielle pushes Laura to call a songwriter and plans a family trip to Nashville. What does it say about their bond that Danielle sees Laura's talent more clearly than Laura does?

B3 Witness

In the hospital chapters Laura notices small details that bother her. How does the book put the reader in the role of a witness, and what stood out to you?

B4 Decisions

Danielle's husband makes the funeral and medical decisions as next of kin. How did those decisions shape the family's grief and their questions?

B5 Suspicion

The book says no one would say the word murder, "not that evening, not yet." How does it handle the space between suspicion and proof?

B6 Laughter

One of the funniest parts of the book is also the funeral. Why does grief make room for laughter?

Section C: Asking questions

SPOILERS through the end of Chapter 23.

-
- C1** **Friends**
Some friends push Laura to “let this go,” while one arrives in pajamas and leopard-print slippers. What makes a friend a true friend in a crisis, and have you been on either side?
-
- C2** **Performing**
In Toronto, Laura becomes a confident on-air personality in the middle of grief. What does that chapter say about performing strength?
-
- C3** **The bridge**
In “Taking the Bridge,” Laura reaches a breaking point in her marriage and has a brief moment of despair before choosing to go home. What does the chapter suggest about what keeps a person going? (A content note applies. See “A note before you meet.”)
-
- C4** **Comedy and crime**
“Grand Theft Rabbit” pairs an absurd comic caper with a murder investigation. Why do you think Laura puts them side by side?
-
- C5** **Proof**
A detective reminds Laura that suspicion is not proof. Where do you stand on the difference between what you believe and what you can prove?
-

Section D: Finding herself

SPOILERS through the end of Chapter 29.

D1 **Strangers**
In Nashville, Laura can breathe again among people who do not know her story. What does it mean to be somewhere nobody knows you as “the sister of the girl that...”?

D2 **Wrong turn**
Laura builds a “wrong turn” theory: if she had moved to Nashville young, none of it would have happened. Why do survivors search for the moment it could have been prevented?

D3 **Carrying her**
A therapist tells Laura she has absorbed her sister's personality. Have you ever carried someone's traits after losing them?

D4 **Exhumation**
The family fights for months to have Danielle exhumed for an autopsy. What does that show about how far people go for answers, and what would you have done?

D5 **No answer**
The autopsy report arrives the same day as Laura's divorce, and it does not answer the question. What did you expect it to say, and what does the book gain by refusing a tidy resolution?

D6 **Children**
Laura's sons are relieved when she ends her marriage. What did you make of how children see what adults try to hide?

Section E: Starting over

SPOILERS through the end of Chapter 31.

E1 Jonathan

How did you read Laura's relationship with Jonathan: love, escape, grief, or all three? Why does she later call it one way of self-destructing?

E2 Letting go

In "Peace," Laura loses her house, moves in with her parents, and says the nightmares stopped when she let it go. What do you make of losing everything as a path to peace?

E3 Her father

Laura's father, who has little patience for weakness, softens in this part of the book. What changed for him, and what changed for Laura?

E4 Justice

Laura decides that justice always comes, but it is not her job to be the judge. Do you agree, and what does that attitude cost and give her?

E5 Forgiveness

Laura writes, "I forgive myself." What is she forgiving, and does the book earn it?

E6 The last line

The final line turns the title around. How did it feel to move from "This is not my life" to "This is my life"?

E7 Corrections

Danielle would probably make "additions, omissions, or corrections." What do you think she would say?

Part Three

After you finish

Big-picture questions with full spoilers

“Inappropriate humor is, was and will always be my hiding place.”

Part Three: after you finish

FULL SPOILERS, including the ending. Stop here if your group has not finished the book.

Big-picture questions

- 1** **No verdict**
The book names no verdict and refuses a neat conclusion. How did that sit with you, and has anything in your own life stayed unresolved?
- 2** **Hoping**
Laura says she was not wishing the autopsy would prove murder. Why might a person hope for the opposite of what they suspect?
- 3** **Whose truth**
A memoirist decides what to include and how to frame it. Where did you feel Laura's choices most strongly, and what do you think she softened, sharpened, or left out?
- 4** **Humor**
How does the humor change the book's moral weight? Would it be a better or worse book without it?
- 5** **The women**
The book is full of women: Laura's mother, her aunt, her best friend, her colleagues, and Danielle. Whose presence moved you most?
- 6** **Family**
By the end, Laura describes every family as a cell with a nucleus. What does family mean in this book, and how does that idea sit with your own?
- 7** **Quiet heroes**
Many people show up quietly: a friend in slippers, an aunt, a family member who steps in. Who are the quiet heroes in your own story?

8

Waiting to say

The sisters only become friends in the last months. What would you tell your own sibling or closest friend now, and what are you waiting to say?

9

Your question

If you could ask Laura one question about writing this book, what would it be?

10

One sentence

How would you describe this book to a friend in one sentence, and who would you give it to?

Part Four

Make it an evening

Activities, quote cards, and hosting tips

“Real friends come out in their slippers.”

Activities

Six ways to turn a discussion into an evening. Choose one or two.

1. The land of wants and the land of shoulds

Laura says her sister lived in the land of the wants and she lived in the land of the shoulds. Give everyone an index card. Each person writes three wants on one side and three shoulds on the other, then drops them in a bowl. Draw a card at random, read it aloud, and guess whose it is.

2. A thank-you to your friend in slippers

Write a short note, or send a text tonight, to the friend who showed up for you when it mattered. Bring a photo or a memory to share.

3. The family photo

The book includes a family portrait that goes spectacularly wrong. Everyone brings a photo that shows their family at its most chaotic and tells the story in 90 seconds.

4. Additions, omissions, or corrections

Laura says her sister would have made “additions, omissions, or corrections” to her telling. Pair up. Each person tells a one-minute true story about their family, and the partner offers one addition, one omission, or one correction, the way a sibling would.

5. A letter

In the book, a therapist asks Laura to write her sister a letter. Write a letter to someone you have lost, or to someone who knows you best. Keep it private, or read a line aloud if you want to.

6. Set the mood

Play Stevie Nicks, whose hair Danielle wanted in her teen years, and “Jessie’s Girl,” which turns up at a Nashville open mic. Ask each person to bring one song that reminds them of a sibling or best friend.

Quotes to talk about

Short lines from the book to read aloud, one at a time.

“Inappropriate humor is, was and will always be my hiding place.”

Chapter 19: It's Like I'm Brain Dead

“Real friends come out in their slippers.”

Chapter 20: True Friends Come Out In Their Slippers

“Swim or die, Laura.”

Chapter 21: O' Canada

“Live every moment, even the really dumb ones.”

Chapter 21: O' Canada

“You can't save anybody until you save yourself.”

Chapter 28: Single Mom

“I'm not brave. I've had no choice.”

Chapter 31: Peace

Tips for a great conversation

Simple habits that help a book club talk freely.

Start with a gut reaction. One word each, then a story if someone wants to give one.

Share the content note up front, and tell people they can step out for a minute without explanation.

Invite personal stories without pushing for them. Some members will want to share, and others will prefer to listen.

Hold the mystery lightly. The book does not hand you a verdict. Talk about what the book shows and how it feels, and let the group disagree.

Stay flexible. If the conversation finds its own path, follow it and return to the questions later.

End with one takeaway each. It can be a line, a feeling, or a question that stayed with someone.

Send a note afterward. Thank everyone, and invite those who finished to leave a short review on Amazon or Goodreads.

If you loved this book

The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls	A memoir of an unforgettable family, told with humor and love.
Let's Pretend This Never Happened by Jenny Lawson	A darkly funny memoir about family, anxiety, and surviving.
The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion	A classic account of grief, written clearly and without comfort.
I'll Be Gone in the Dark by Michelle McNamara	True crime, obsession, and the cost of unanswered questions.
Educated by Tara Westover	A memoir about family, truth, and the right to tell your own story.

Favorite lines, questions to bring back, and the book to read next.

Thank you for reading, and for talking about it.

A memoir of sisterhood, suspicion, and starting over

Get the book, read more, and find the full guide online:

thisisnotmylifememoir.com

Finished the book? A short review on Amazon or Goodreads
helps other readers find it.



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