

# CHOICE WORDS

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## WRITERS ON ABORTION

### BOOK CIRCLE DISCUSSION GUIDE

***NOTE TO FACILITATORS:** The first three pages of this Discussion Guide are meant for you to print and read for yourself. The last four pages are designed to be distributed to all the members of your Choice Words Book Circle (printing them double-sided saves trees). You might want to read the “Welcome from the Editor” aloud at your first meeting.*

#### WELCOME FROM EDITOR ANNIE FINCH

**Dear *Choice Words* Discussion Circle,**

Welcome! I’m so glad that you have all decided to gather together, virtually or in person, to discuss the truth-telling literature in *Choice Words: Writers on Abortion*. The typical political arguments about abortion have been made so often that in some ways there’s nothing left to be said. And yet the real conversation has barely started. That’s why I put together this book. The great works of literature gathered here reach beyond argument, into the realm of experience—the place of understanding, authenticity, and empathy for others (and for ourselves).

In *Choice Words* you will encounter writings about abortion from classic and contemporary writers that invoke grief, defiance, fear, shame, desperation, love, awe, tenderness, regret, resolve, rage, compassion, hope, despair, triumph, relief, and peace. Here are writers from the sixteenth through twenty-first centuries, across ethnicities, cultures, genders, and sexualities, and voices from six continents, sharing how class, patriarchy, race and ethnicity, wealth, poverty, and faith traditions impact our understanding and experience of abortion.

To gather in community to discuss what has never been shared is a revolutionary act. To do so as people who can have abortions may be even more so. As Dr. Jean Bolen describes in her book *The Millionth Circle: How to Change Ourselves and the World—The Essential Guide to Women’s Circles*, a circle that meets regularly is a powerful force. So I’m especially excited at the potential for discussions of this book to bring us into circle together.

Literature can help transform the conversation about reproductive freedom by giving voice to the universality and the uniqueness of each abortion and its relationship to human integrity and justice. I hope *Choice Words* will help spark these new kinds of conversations; let the questions in this guide be a start. More discussion ideas can be found in the book’s “Foreword” and “Introduction.” Thank you for joining this crucial conversation, and I hope to have the chance to visit your circle virtually, if not in person.

—**Annie Finch**, Editor, *Choice Words: Writers on Abortion*

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#### FACILITATOR TIPS: STARTING A CIRCLE

The most important thing to remember when forming a circle is to do what is comfortable for you. Since *Choice Words* is divided into five sections, a series of five gatherings may be a nice way to experience the book. You could meet once a week or once a month. If meeting in person is not feasible, platforms such as Google Hangout, Skype, or Zoom are great online options.

You'll also want to decide the nature of your circle. Will it be inclusive of only people who have had an abortion? Certain age groups? Only people who *can* have an abortion? You will find more suggestions for types of circles, such as partner circles and more, in the Choice Words Event Tool Kit at [www.choicewordsaction.org](http://www.choicewordsaction.org). As the facilitator, you

are charged with setting the boundaries so that participants will feel completely comfortable sharing their thoughts and their experiences.

It's helpful for everyone to exchange emails and phone numbers on the first day. This way, you as facilitator won't have to serve as the center for every communication. And even for a virtual circle, it's handy to be able to text the group to reschedule a meeting if needed.

Haymarket Books, publisher of *Choice Words: Writers on Abortion*, has generously offered to provide swag such as buttons and bumper stickers to Book Discussion Circles while supplies last. Contact [dana@haymarketbooks.org](mailto:dana@haymarketbooks.org) with your request.

#### A FEW CAUTIONS AND CAVEATS WHEN PLANNING A CIRCLE FROM *CHOICE WORDS* CONTRIBUTOR, ACTIVIST, AND WRITER, DESIREE COOPER

Base who you invite into the circle upon who you believe will hold the trust of the group, and who will always be respectful, even when dissenting or disagreeing.

Consider whether open sharing would burden or even break friendships and associations. For example, a discussion circle made up of all coworkers could impinge upon effective work relationships.

Keep safety at the forefront of your plans. If you are meeting in a public place, make sure that you have access to a closed room (not a table in the middle of a restaurant or coffeehouse, for example).

Keep your circle small and manageable so that discussions will stay productive and respectful.

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#### FACILITATOR TIPS: RUNNING A CIRCLE

Each discussion should have at least one facilitator to ask questions and keep things moving. You can do it yourself, have a partner or two, or rotate the position. Here is the most important piece of advice for facilitating a book circle: if energy sags or things bog down too much in the personal or political, remember to **bring it back to the book**.

I hasten to clarify that “bringing it back to the book” is not an end in itself. This is a friendly community-building circle, not a for-credit college class. So you won’t want to interrupt productive, moving personal discussion that is allowing people to grow and communicate; that’s why they’re here. On the other hand, when the conversation stops feeling truly transformative, that’s where you need to jump in and bring it back to the book. Quote something from the text, ask a book-based question, or bring a new piece from the book into the discussion. Hopefully, before you know it, people will be focused on the text and positive again. If you are new to this, it may feel odd interjecting at first—but the circle will be grateful to you.

Assuming you have given everyone a copy of the Book Circle Handout, your group may find its own consensus about how to use the questions provided there. Here are a few possibilities:

- The group’s main facilitator (or facilitators) chooses questions and topics from the Discussion Guide and uses them to help guide the group through the book.
- The group shares facilitation, using the questions to provide a structure: each person in the group chooses a question or topic from the list, or invents their own question, and leads a short discussion about it.
- The group moves through the book, perhaps proceeding section by section, and discusses it in an organic flow. The discussion questions and topics are kept handy and

are used to provoke thought, offer new perspectives, or however anyone wants to use them.

However you organize the group, if you are sitting in a circle, make sure that everyone can see everyone else in the circle. Consider using a special item that is passed around the circle from one speaker to the next, making sure everyone gets a chance and speakers are not interrupted while they are holding it. Do make sure to let everyone know they may “pass” if they would prefer not to speak to each point. For virtual circles, decide on an order for speaking (maybe alphabetical by first name, or the order in which the images of people are displayed on the platform) and check-in with participants to ensure no one is overlooked or made to feel like they *must* speak. Try going around the circle two or three times.

**Note from Annie Finch:** As a gesture of support towards *Choice Words* Discussion Circles, I am making myself available to visit in-person or virtually as my schedule permits. You will find a request form to fill out at [www.anniefinch.com/virtualvisit](http://www.anniefinch.com/virtualvisit).

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#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(To find the suggested authors' works, see the index below)

1. Works by Kamen and Arcana are based in their experience assisting people to find abortions in the 1970s. What did you learn about that period from reading them? How did you respond to the pieces by Falk, Shah, and Kelapure about more recent news events? What lessons can we as contemporary readers learn from the older texts in *Choice Words*? (There is a timeline of works published before 1990 near the end of the book).
2. The contributions by Hanratty and Neuschwander are about a very different kind of abortion than the majority of pieces in the book. So are the contributions by Ashok, Malaviya, Sharma, and Yan. What did you learn from these writings? How does reading them affect your understanding of the other works in the book?
3. Abortion is affected by the intersections of numerous social categories. How do issues of race and racism play out in the works by Hughes, Kamen, Shange, Felix, and others? How does disability impact the abortion experience in the pieces by Finger? How does class interact with abortion in the excerpt from Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* and in Wollstoncraft, LeGuin, Naylor, Smith, Ai, Hughes, Parker, and others? What is the intersection of abortion and sexuality in the excerpt from Rita Mae Brown's classic lesbian novel? How do gender and abortion intersect in Reeser, Malaviya, Muten, and Sharma, and others?
4. Religion and spirituality are interwoven into many of these works of literature. "Mainstream" religious beliefs affect the experience of abortion in Betts, Morris, Shah, Kamal, Fried, Levy, Stefanescu, Hauser, and others, while Maia, Oates, Finch, Collings, Morris, Earthschild and Willow, Silko, Coyle, Paris, Atwood in "Surfacing," and others engage with more earth-centered spiritual approaches. What is the experience of reading these works in relation to one another?
5. Much of the contemporary controversy over abortion in the US concerns the effects that people assume abortion has on women's psychological states. How does reading this book affect your sense of the real psychological effects? How do feelings of shame or regret about abortion play out in McDonnell, Hanratty, Shange, Akresh-Gonzalez, Earthschild and Willow, Larkin, Calbert, Shah, Parker, Brooks, and in many pieces in the "Heart" section? How do these pieces interact with works that present an abortion as something to be celebrated with little or no reservation, such as Rivera, Ghodsee, Mahlangu, Alvarado, Josephine, Steinem, and Piercy's "Right to Life"?
6. Friends, children, boyfriends, and husbands play important roles in many of these works (more information may be found in the lists below). But mothers appear most consistently. What can we learn about the role of mothers from the works by Conrad, Haggard, LeGuin, the Kenyan Teenagers, Kamal, Cooper, Hughes, Browne, LeDuc, Weisert, Kane, Hauser, Saphra, Calbert, and others?
7. In many of these pieces, abortion is a turning point. What do the characters learn from their abortions in Drabble, West, Clifton, Smedley, Brown, Valente, Mahlangu, Rodriguez, and others?
8. How do politics and nationalism intersect with abortion, in works by Saleh, Johnson, Quinlan, Saphra, Blandiana, Yan, Salach, and others? What is the role of political protest in the pieces by LeGuin, Muske-Dukes, Oates, DeDakis, Levin, Bruce, Alleyne, and Haggard?
9. How do different cultural and social traditions affect the experience of abortion throughout the book? You may want to look at the pieces by Reeser, Jhabvala, Kamal, Cooper, Le, Hughes, Stefanescu, Tam Lin, Conrad, and the Kenyan Teenagers. After reading this book, which approaches to abortion and ways of handling it do you find most positive or useful?

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#### QUESTIONS ON ACTIVISM FROM FEMINIST ACTIVIST AND CHOICE WORDS ACTION FOUNDER ASH JORDAN

10. What is the relationship between literature and activism?  
How can we use *Choice Words* and Choice Words Action to convince neighbors and friends to commit to reproductive justice and to create a culture of “abortion without apology?”
11. How can we bring *Choice Words* to the most marginalized people among us?
12. How else can we use *Choice Words* to build feminist community?

**NOTE:** After you have finished reading and discussing the book, please be sure to download the full Choice Words Action #ChoiceParty tool kit at [www.choicewordsaction.org](http://www.choicewordsaction.org), for ideas about how to share this book with your community and use Choice Words to work for reproductive justice!

#### YOUR NOTES

## SOME OTHER THEMES FOR POSSIBLE DISCUSSION

**Doctors, midwives, abortion providers:** Cruz, LeGuin, West, Jhabvala, Maia, Manning, Burton, Rol, Steinem, Reeser, Hawkins, Lim, DeSilva-Johnson

**Dream-like or non-realistic images and events:** Acker, Lamb, Shmailo, Nao, Rich, Sexton, Nalkowska, Goldwasser, Wetherington, Mahlangu, Anderson, O'Hara, Hume

**Existing children:** Cooper, Naylor, Clifton, Hanratty, White

**Father of the embryo/fetus:** West, Peacock, Alvarez, Moss, Smedley, Rodriguez, Kamal, Olds, Hassanzadeh-Mostafavi, Södergran, Shange

**Friends:** Ernaux, Rodriguez, Wolpe, Aboulela, Alvarez, Nalkowska, Carr

**Illegal abortion:** Enriquez, Rivera, Nalkowska, Alvarado, Lorde, Peri Rossi, Drabble, Cusack

**Nature:** Atwood, Geddes, Coyle, Inez, Chin-Tanner, Townsend, Södergran, Korn, Stone, Wheeler, Walker, Silko, Peacock, Coffman

**Speaking to the embryo/fetus:** Clifton, Alleyne, Day, Brooks, Finch, Doubiago, Johnson, Davis, Starhawk, DiPrima

## YOUR NOTES

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