

Toward the Light

A Year in Paris

Discussion Questions

1. The first two chapters of *Toward the Light* show the change Deborah experienced in leaving small-town Iowa and arriving in Paris. What details about those two settings stood out to you?
2. Deborah's adjustment to living with Lily and her parents came with surprises and challenges. What was the most memorable aspect of her adjustment period for you?
3. The American Church and choir become "home" for Deborah even before the assault. Have you had a similar experience of "coming home" when visiting a new place? If so, what was that like for you?
4. Deborah found friends in Ava and Catherine within weeks of her arrival. What did the two of them demonstrate about the meaning of friendship, both before and after the assault?
5. Readers often bring romantic visions of Paris to books set in the City of Light. How does *Toward the Light* ask readers to hold the beauty of Paris and the ugliness of the assault at once, rather than choosing one over the other?
6. Deborah decided to stay in Paris after the assault. Reflect on a time you stayed in a difficult situation when every instinct told you to leave. What kept you there? What did staying teach you that leaving would not have?
7. Reflect on an adventure you embarked upon (a trip, a new job, etc.) that didn't turn out as planned, and how you navigated the difficulties that arose.

8. Singing in the choir became an important part of Deborah's time in Paris, especially after the assault. Why might a physical, communal ritual like singing matter so much to someone rebuilding a sense of safety? What other rituals could serve a similar purpose?

9. What did you think of Deborah's choice to tell her parents she was "mugged" rather than the truth? How did it affect your view of her relationship with her family?

10. The running tights she mends by hand (and later throws in a dumpster) function almost like ritual objects. What other physical objects or actions in the book carry symbolic weight for Deborah's recovery?

11. Deborah wonders whether she'll be able to forgive her attacker, and why she should. What did you think about how the book handles the question of forgiveness?

12. "Viper" becomes her name for embodied fear. Did giving fear a character/name change how you understood her journey?

13. How did Deborah's trip to Barcelona offer an opportunity for healing?

14. Why do you think Deborah decided to extend her time in Paris with an internship? In what ways did her decision impact her healing?

15. The book opens with the Reims scene (Prologue) before circling back to tell the story chronologically. What did that structural choice do for you as a reader? Did it change how you experienced the assault when you read Chapter Twelve?

16. Did your feelings about Claudette change over the course of the book? If so, in what ways? What prompted changes in your perspective?

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17. Deborah and Claudette seem different, but in what ways do their journeys run parallel?
18. What key moments in Deborah's relationship with Lily stood out to you? How did their relationship change over time?
19. The book explores how healing begins when you're far from all that you know. How did distance from home help or complicate Deborah's healing?
20. The book deliberately avoids a neat "I'm healed" ending. What does healing look like in this story?
21. How did you feel about the book's unresolved spiritual questions?
22. When have your beliefs (religious, spiritual, or otherwise) been tested by something that happened to you?
23. Despite the serious content of the book, there are moments of lightness, humor, and joy. Which of those moments stood out for you?
24. Think of a single year that changed you more than any other. What did you believe about yourself at the beginning of that year, and what did you believe at the end?
25. What do you think changed within Deborah during her year in Paris? Did the book change anything in you? If so, what?
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