

Discussion Questions for *You Could Make This Place Beautiful*

by Maggie Smith

1. I've always been unsure of how I feel about memoir as a genre, especially after it exploded in popularity and it seemed like everyone was writing one. I was annoyed that so many people felt like their every thought about their lives was worthy of a book; like a vastly expanded Facebook page. That was my opinion until I read *You Could Make This Place Beautiful*. I was so taken with Maggie Smith's book that I wanted to write a memoir myself. So, what is it about this one that changed my mind? I think it's because, much like our last book club selection, *Notes on an Execution*, Smith's unusual and crafty construction of her book makes it read like a combination of literary fiction, true crime, a research paper with citations, and a play, all while displaying her most intimate feelings and rawest emotions. For me, this approach took the writing of a memoir to a whole new and superior level. **I'm curious if the structure of this memoir changed your feelings about how you approached it (or memoir in general)? If the experimental nature helped or hurt your response to the book. (Judy Wood)**
2. Are there indications and clues in the approach, technique, organization (or lack thereof) that show this was written by a poet? **(Judy Catterton)**
3. In a book so narrowly focused on one subject—the break-up of a marriage—is there enough variety, to sustain reader interest? **(Sarah Barnett)**
4. What function do the one sentence sections have in this book? What effect is the author aiming for? How do these one-line “chapters” affect the reader? Examples are single quotes (pg. 154, 169) or the repeated: “A friend says every book begins with an unanswered question (at least 12 of these) or just isolated random single sentences (pg. 195, for instance, or pg.225). **(Judy Catterton, Maribeth Fischer)**
5. A lot of renowned fiction writers disdain the whole notion of “likability,” meaning characters should not have to be “likeable” for a book to be compelling, page-turning, meaningful, etc. I tend to agree, and yet—it seems that if we don't “like” the narrator in non-fiction, this is an issue. Maybe a big issue. I struggled with Smith's one-sided condemnation of her husband (even though I admired a lot of the writing). I started questioning her—how could she? This is her children's father—but now, maybe I was

the one being unfair. It's not our job to judge the writer's life, is it? To condemn her choices? Or is it fair in memoir? (*Maribeth Fischer*)

6. Related to the above is the issue of whose story is a memoir and is it okay to tell other people's stories, even when they are commingled with your story? That question has come up a lot lately in fiction writing (the appropriation of others' stories)—think *American Dirt*. But is it different in memoir? Famous people have been lambasted over the years for revealing 'truths' in writing about people who did not want to have them told. Now that so many more authors are writing memoirs, should we get permission from those we include in our story? Feel guilty? Blast ahead? (*Judy Wood, Judy Catterton*)

7. I'm wondering about the continuing metaphor of the play. Why did she choose to use it? Is it to distance herself from her own narrative? Does it work? (*Judy Catterton*)