

BOOK CLUB GUIDE

HERE WITH YOU

A MEMOIR OF LOVE,
FAMILY, AND ADDICTION



KATHY WAGNER

The powerful story of a mother's struggle to save her son from addiction — and the strength and hope for change that she found in her grief.

“Written with novelistic skill, Kathy Wagner’s vivid and moving memoir depicts how trauma, unrecognized, can blight a family across generations and culminate in tragedy, even in the face of fierce and abiding parental love. And, miraculously, how out of tragedy can arise the redemptive blessing of healing and compassion.”

— GABOR MATÉ MD, CM, author of *The Myth of Normal: Trauma, Illness and Healing in a Toxic Culture*



Douglas & McIntyre
www.douglas-mcintyre.com

A NOTE FROM KATHY WAGNER

Dear reader,

Thank you for choosing *Here With You* for your book club!

Memoirs are an interesting genre. For the author, they're personal. In *Here With You*, I put more of myself on the page than I ever thought possible, and more of my son than I ever expected. I wrestled with words in a way that felt beyond my skills and ability. I wanted to give up, numerous times, but I didn't. None of it was comfortable. All of it was hard. Every bit of it was worth it and I'm so glad I persevered.

For a reader, though, it's just a story. The people on the page are characters in a book, and they must earn your interest and affection. The situations, settings, and secondary characters may seem designed to move the plot forward, or add depth and balance. That's such a weird thought for me, because it's not just a story—it's my life! But you're not wrong. *Here With You* represents only a slice of my life which I carefully crafted so that I could share not just my truth with you, but the truth of so many others.

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022) and the Government of Canada Statistics (2022), drug overdoses are now the leading cause of accidental deaths in the US and Canada, with over 106,000 Americans and over 7,000 Canadians having lost their lives to drug "overdose" in 2021 alone. Yet, can they really be called overdoses when virtually all street drugs now contain a toxic blend of chemicals unknown to the person who buys and uses them?

With so many families affected, I want parents who are struggling with a child living in active addiction, or who have a child who has died from drug harms, to know that they are not alone. And that there is hope—even if hope looks different from anything they could have expected.

Life goes on for those of us left living, and while I believe we have an obligation to use our experiences to change the world for the better (even in the tiniest of ways), I also believe we have every right to enjoy the hell out of our lives! We get to laugh with friends, read engaging books (and leave boring ones unfinished), drink exotic teas and eat gourmet chocolate, try new things, make mistakes, and dance like nobody's looking.

Dear reader, I hope you use your book club meeting to do just that: have fun and connect with people you care about. Reading and discussing the book is purely optional. But if you do read and discuss *Here With You*, I

hope it helps you in some small way—maybe to escape for a few hours, or to know that others have been where you are now and survived, or perhaps to adopt a more compassionate perspective when looking at yourself or others.

Wishing you so much love and hope,



Kathy Wagner

PS: I would love to come to your book club meeting and discuss *Here With You*! I'm available for in-person book club meetings in Metro Vancouver, BC, or for online book clubs elsewhere (unless you want to pay travel expenses for me to join you in Hawaii or the South of France, in which case I'm totally down!)

Visit www.kwagnerwrites/contact to get in touch.



SETTING THE SCENE

SET THE TABLE

References to food are prolific throughout *Here With You*. Tristan expresses himself through cooking, the narrator nurtures others by feeding them, and the characters connect with each other by sharing a meal.

Which of the foods mentioned in *Here With You* lend themselves to your style of book club meeting? Perhaps it's a fine-dining experience of a multi-course meal with wine pairings, or a cultural exploration with okayu as a focal point. What about a perfectly barbecued steak or salmon with corn on the cob or asparagus and a caesar salad? A hearty beef stew or fettucini primavera? Perhaps a potluck would be fun, and people could bring the discordant but delicious combination of charcuterie, spring rolls, beet salad, lamb chops, mussels, fresh bread, and french fries. If you meet over brunch, you might want to serve home-made granola, gluten-free doughnuts, french toast with whipped cream and bacon and berries, or high tea with plenty of Earl Grey. If you're meeting over the holiday season, you could have a Christmas baking party!

There are so many foods to choose from in *Here With You*, there is sure to be something that works for your gang. And don't forget Tristan's killer caramel sauce (recipe included). He was right—all the girls do want that caramel sauce!

SET THE MOOD

Music is a backdrop for many scenes in *Here With You*, and playing the same songs in your book club is a fun way to immerse yourself in the feelings of the story. Below is a list of songs and music mentioned throughout the book—use them for inspiration to set the mood of your meeting.

DIDO: "I'm No Angel"

SIMON & GARFUNKEL: "Bridge Over Troubled Water"

ELTON JOHN: "I'm Still Standing"

CYNDI LAUPER: "Girls Just Want to Have Fun"

BOB MARLEY: Legend album (with a special shout out to "Redemption Song")

JUSTIN BIEBER: "Purpose"

KING'S COLLEGE CHOIR: Miscellaneous Christmas carols

Miscellaneous tai chi and Chinese meditation music

TRISTAN'S KILLER CARMEL SAUCE RECIPE

"I'm fucking awesome, Mom!" [Tristan] yelled one afternoon, licking warm caramel sauce from his fingers, shimmying around the kitchen while singing along to Elton John's "I'm Still Standing." "This is fuckin' eh! All the girls are going to want this caramel sauce."

MAKES 1½ CUPS

Granulated sugar	1¾ cups
Lemon juice	1½ tsp
Water	¼ cup
Cream, 35%, room temp	1 cup
Unsalted butter, in pieces	3 tbsp

The magic is in the method for this one! If you're not familiar with making caramel sauce, look up the method for a traditional caramel sauce online. Basically, it involves boiling the sugar, water, and lemon juice on high heat, without stirring, until it's dark brown but not burnt (that's the tricky part). Then, remove from the heat and gradually whisk in the cream (not too fast, and not too slow), add the pieces of butter, and then strain and cool.

Serve with slices of granny smith apple, sponge cake, salted pretzels, or anything else you may want to dip into it. Or warm it up and drizzle over ice cream or just eat it by the spoonful!



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

STORY AND THEMES

1. What was your favourite part of *Here With You*? Your least favourite? Which scene has stuck with you the most?
2. Themes of isolation and community are important in this book. How does isolation and community show up for both Tristan and the narrator? What were the impacts? Were there similarities in their experiences?
3. The narrator was faced with a number of moral dilemmas in this book. At one point, she drove her son, Tristan, to a drug deal and gave him money to buy the drugs. Do you feel she did the right thing or the wrong thing? Why?
4. Addiction impacts families, not just the people struggling with substance use disorder. How was Tanis impacted by her siblings' addictions? How did addiction affect the entire family dynamic?
5. Recovery from addiction impacts entire families, too. How did Tristan's recovery change everything for the narrator's family?
6. One of the recovery concepts the narrator finds helpful in *Here With You* is the idea of "living life on life's terms." What are some of the terms of your life you wish were different, but aren't?
7. The narrator actively practices gratitude and acceptance during her recovery process and later, in grief. How did this benefit her? How does gratitude and acceptance show up in your life?
8. Toward the end of the book, the narrator wrestles with the idea that Tristan experienced, and perpetuated, trauma that she was not aware of. What role do you think trauma played in Tristan's addiction? In his healing? How did the narrator reframe Tristan's trauma in a way that felt healing rather than harmful?
9. At one point in *Here With You*, the narrator realizes that "to let go of my fear of death, I had to accept it as inevitable and unpredictable." Do you agree? Why or why not?
10. Abstinence-based treatment centres and 12-step recovery programs are controversial and not for everyone, but they do work for many people. Do you feel that they did or did not work well for Tristan? For Jenn? For the narrator? Why or why not?
11. What was your perception of people experiencing substance use disorder before you read *Here With You*? What was your perception of parents raising troubled teens? Did reading this book change your perception in any way?
12. If *Here With You* were made into a movie or TV series, who would you cast in the role of the narrator? Who would you cast as Tristan? As Jenn and Tanis and Emily? As the narrator's mother?

WRITING CRAFT AND CHOICES

1. What's the significance of the book's title, *Here With You*? Did you find it meaningful? Why or why not?
2. *Here With You* employs simple, straight-forward language and word choices. Did you find this writing style engaging? Why or why not?
3. Were there any sentences or quotes that stood out for you? What were they and why were they memorable?
4. The author originally drafted *Here With You* with woven timelines, alternating between scenes when Tristan was in addiction and when he was in recovery. Later, she streamlined the story to be chronological. What would have been the benefits and drawbacks of a woven timeline? What are the benefits and drawbacks of it being chronological?
5. The sense of place is important throughout *Here With You*, with scenes set in China, Portugal, Puerto Rico, Costa Rica, and British Columbia (New Westminster, Coquitlam, and Vancouver Island). Which setting did you find most evocative? Most surprising? Which location would you most like to visit, and why?
6. In *Here With You*, the author discloses details about her son's life that he hadn't chosen to share with her, let alone the world. Why do you think she did this? Do you agree with her choice?
7. How did you feel about the ending of *Here With You*? Why?
8. In what ways is *Here With You* similar to, and different from, other memoirs you've read?
9. Would you recommend *Here With You* to others? Why or why not?
10. If you could ask the author anything, what would it be?

KATHY'S NOTE: *Feel free to e-mail me your questions or, better yet, invite me to your book club meeting!*



PHOTOS FROM SCENES IN HERE WITH YOU



Tanis took this photo of Tristan, healthy and happy, two months into his recovery. (Sept 2016)



Tristan in China for the second time, striking a pose. (Oct 2013)



Tristan, Tanis, and Jenn goofing around at a family dinner. (Apr 2017)



"Emily" (who didn't want her picture taken), Tanis, Tristan, Jenn, Me, and Mom. (Our last Mother's Day together, May 2017)