



FLATIRON
BOOKS
NEW YORK

How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water Reading Group Guide

Welcome to the Reading Group Guide for *How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water*. Please note: In order to provide reading groups with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal important aspects of the plot of this novel—as well as the ending. If you have not finished reading *How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water*, we respectfully suggest that you may want to wait before reviewing this guide.

1. What does the title, *How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water*, mean to you? How does it resonate throughout the novel?
2. How do you understand Fernando's decision to leave home and break off all contact with Cara? Do you sympathize with his actions? What do you think Fernando and Cara's future together might look like?
3. Discuss Cara's friendship with Lulú. How are they similar and different? How do they support each other over the course of the novel? What does their bond suggest about the possibility of different support systems outside the traditional bounds of marriage and family?
4. Interspersed with the session transcripts are documents from Cara's life. Which documents did you find most surprising or illuminating? Why do you think the author decided to tell the story this way?
5. Though we never hear Cara's social worker, Lissette, speak, she is a significant character in the book. What do we learn about her over the course of the novel? How might Cara's narration have been different if she had been speaking with a different interviewer?
6. What do you make of Alicia the Psychic and her visions? What might her subplot suggest about the role of fate, freewill, and agency in Cara's life?
7. We see many different examples of motherhood in this novel. How are Cara and Angela shaped by their own complicated history with their mother, and how does that history inform the relationship the sisters have with each other? How does Lulú's relationship with her son, Adonis, compare to Cara's relationship with Fernando? What do these different mothers get wrong and what do they get right?
8. Cara speaks frequently about how her apartment building is changing as older residents are pushed out by newer, wealthier tenants. What impact does gentrification have on Cara's life? How does Tita and Cecilia's story in particular shine light on the financial precariousness of these residents' lives and their vulnerability?

9. In describing her affair with Cristián that led her to leave Hato Mayor for New York, Cara says, “We step in the shit on purpose so we’re forced to buy new shoes” (p. 15). What does she mean? Are there more examples in the book of Cara and other characters “stepping in the shit” in order to change their lives? Can you describe a similar experience from your own life?
10. Cara describes a documentary she watched about whales in which grandmother whales are shown to “prove their value after la menopausia. Because not having to make babies makes them focus on taking care of the community. Which tells me that women of a certain age are more valuable to the community” (p. 167). How does Cara contribute to her community? How do you believe our society tends to value older women like Cara?
11. We can infer that both Fernando and La Vieja Caridad are queer, although Cara herself uses words like “different” and “soft” to describe them. In what ways does homophobia play a role in Cara’s estrangement from Fernando? How does her relationship to Fernando and his perceived difference compare and contrast to her relationship to Caridad? Do you think Cara’s views change over the course of the novel? If so, how?
12. When the novel opens, during the Great Recession, Cara has been out of work for almost two years, after the factory where she spent decades working moved to Costa Rica. What obstacles has Cara faced as she tries to get back into the workforce? What does the novel suggest about shifts in work, especially blue-collar work, after the recession? Discuss any parallels you found with the nature of work today, in light of the pandemic.
13. La Vieja Caridad tells Cara: “We must not wait to live the life we want. Find a way to be present with the people you love” (p. 168). What lessons does Caridad offer Cara about aging and living a meaningful life, even if it’s unconventional?
14. At the end of the novel, Cara tells Lisette: “Talking to you, all these weeks, has been very good for me. I have learned a lot. Talking reminds me that no matter how difficult my life is, I have always found a solution to my problems. When I think about this, I am not afraid. We can do this. I can do it. Write this down: Cara Romero is still here, entera” (p. 191). What do you think Cara has learned over the course of her twelve sessions? How do you think her perspective has changed? What do you think the future holds for her?