

*A Garden to Keep* by [Jamie Langston Turner](#)

**Reading Group Guide**

1. Early on, Elizabeth categorizes people as either Aware or Unaware, with herself as an Aware person. Who are the truly Aware characters in the book? Is it actually possible for people to be aware, or is something only granted in hindsight? Is Elizabeth actually aware?
2. From what place in her life is Elizabeth telling this story? How does her claim that “the past bleeds into the present, and the present turns into the future, and the future reverts to the past” influence the story? Does the present really ever turn into the future?
3. Read the two poems (pgs 58 and 402) Elizabeth writes using the line “Even the dirt kept breathing with a small breath.” Find Theodore Roethke’s poem “The Dirt Cellar” and compare the three poems. Are there thematic similarities? Differences? How do Elizabeth’s poems differ from the reality of where she is in life?
4. “Motherhood is that part of a woman’s life, I think, that comes closest to being completely selfless” (pg 49). How does Elizabeth’s point of view change on this issue? Is she ever selfless?
5. What makes Elizabeth so sure that Ken has cheated on her? What does that say about her own heart and the truths that become clear to her later in the book? Why do you think Ken chose to commit adultery?
6. Compare and contrast Ken and Elizabeth’s marriage to the other marriages in the book: the Seacrests’, Margaret’s, Elizabeth’s parents’, Ken’s parents’. Which of the marriages is the strongest? The weakest?
7. There is an important dynamic between husbands and wives and mothers and sons that the book sets up. Discuss Elizabeth’s “motherhood” as compared to her “wifedom.” Do you think she’ll ever let Travis be his own man? Where did she most go wrong—as a mother or as a wife? Rarely mentioned, Elizabeth’s daughter, Jennifer, seems to be a nonentity in her mother’s life. Discuss Elizabeth’s relationship with Jennifer.
8. One of the effects of Elizabeth’s conversion is a new point of view of life. Since God rules the universe, there is an order to circumstances. Things happen for a reason, rather than being simply random. Does everything happen for a reason? Is Elizabeth truly seeing God’s active hand in her life time after time? Is it possible to know what is of God and what is merely coincidence?
9. Another big theme in the book is dividing lines. Elizabeth is obsessed with finding the point at which one thing (sleet) becomes another (snow). There are a number of dividing

lines in this book, the most important, of course, being her conversion. What are some others? Does she miss some?

10. Discuss the role of other Christian characters--Margaret, Harvey, Barb, etc.--in shaping Elizabeth's growing faith. What lessons does she learn from them? How does her faith change from the time of her conversion to the end of her tale?

11. Elizabeth describes her writing as a work of "translation." What is she translating "from" and what is she translating "to"? She admits that her memory is imperfect (pg 249). What kind of shadow does that cast on her translation? Since she is so aware of reading symbols into everything and knows how to read poems, is her writing actually an interpretation rather than a translation. What's the difference between the two?

12. When reading first-person novels, the reader must be wary of the fact that the narrator—either on purpose or by accident—may be misleading you. These "unreliable" narrators have their own agenda for telling their stories and are committed to making the reader see their point of view. On what points do you think Elizabeth is the most unreliable? Where do you think she is absolutely telling the truth? Which other character would tell a completely different story from the one we read?

13. Why do you think we find out so late about Elizabeth's miscarriage? What does this secret mean to her? Does this change how you feel about her as a character, especially since she refused to tell even her husband? What do you think of her line "I can see my readers already shaking their heads, ready to judge me" (pg 342)? Who is she referring to here, and why does she feel this way?

14. Poetry has a huge influence in Elizabeth's life. Often the poems' clarity of thought and wisdom seem to have a deep emotional effect on her (page 310). But does she apply most of what she quotes?

15. Early on, Elizabeth and Margaret spend a lengthy time commenting on book titles, and throughout the book Elizabeth gives her opinion on titles of poems. What does the title, *A Garden to Keep*, mean to you? Would Elizabeth think it was a good title?

### **Further Activities for Your Group**

1. Watch *Babette's Feast* together and discuss its role in the book.

2. Read any of the poems mentioned by Elizabeth. Is her interpretation of them solid? Is she pulling things out of context or remaining true to the poem?