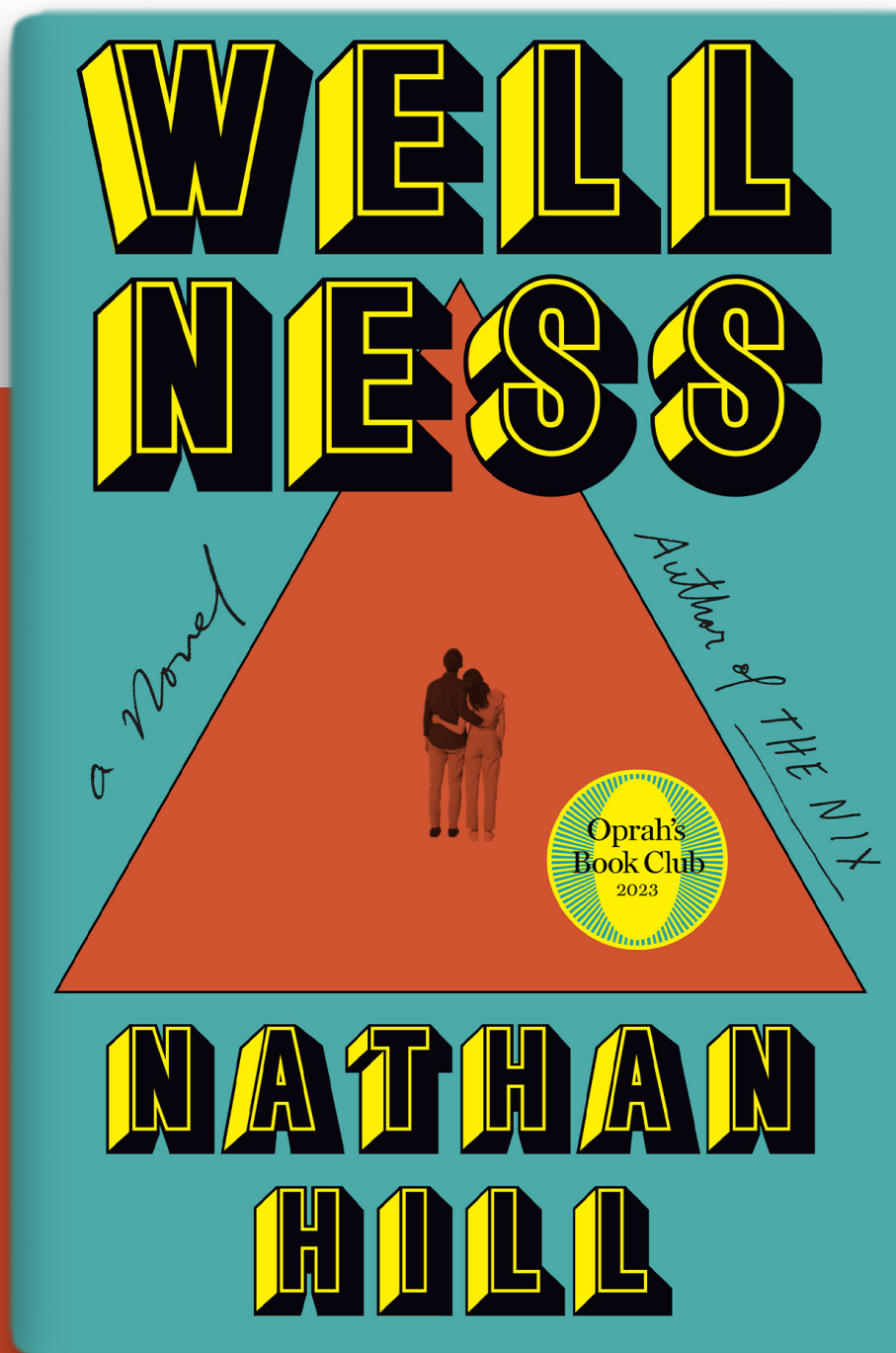


READING GROUP GUIDE



Reading Group Guide

▼ ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The questions, discussion topics, and other material that follow are intended to enhance your group's conversation of Nathan Hill's *Wellness*, a love story both contemporary and timeless that explores the ways science, art, religion, and culture shape the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves—and one another—and therefore shape the reality in which we live.

Have you ever been under the placebo effect—in a medical or other context? After reading *Wellness*, can you look back on certain events, decisions, or changes that took place in your life and attribute those changes to belief alone?

Dr. Sanborne's theory of love is one explanation for why Jack and Elizabeth were attracted to each other (including the intimacy questionnaire that Elizabeth uses on their first date). Can you think of any other theories or explanations—from psychology, popular culture, or other traditions/systems—for how their relationship unfolds?

Which of the wellness trends mentioned in the book (Benjamin's diets and supplements; Jack's failed workouts; Elizabeth's and Lawrence's various healing potions, etc.) have you heard of or participated in? Did they produce the desired effect? Do you believe now, and did you believe then, that the product(s) or technique(s) "worked"?

Do you believe that Elizabeth and Jack are soulmates? Do you believe *they* believe they

are? How does their own version of their love story change over time?

When Elizabeth and Jack discuss marriage on their first date, she says, "They say that marriage is hard, but it seems to me if it's that hard then you're probably doing it wrong" (page 36). If someone had said that to her later in the novel, ten years after they met, what do you think she'd say—are they "doing it wrong" because of their challenges?

What did you make of Toby's explanation for why he ate the first apple turnover when Elizabeth tried the marshmallow experiment on him? What does this exchange reveal about the assumptions we make from scientific experiments, even when the results are "statistically significant"?

Discuss Elizabeth's "unraveling" in the grocery store. Has anything like this ever happened to you? Which stressors that she was responding to seem unique to the present moment of the novel, and which are more universal to motherhood/parenthood?

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Kate and Kyle seem to “diagnose” the problems in Jack and Elizabeth’s marriage fairly quickly at the Club. Why do you think they were so blind to their oppositional, enabling qualities? Do you think they knew those truths all along?

How might Jack’s art have developed if he hadn’t gone to art school, where he was introduced to a much more commercial and intellectual approach to art than what he learned from Evelyn?

Are there works of art that, like *American Gothic* does for Jack, evoke certain personal memories or identities for you? If so, which pieces and why?

Jack interprets the history of landscape art—especially of the plains—to mean that “the things we think are beautiful are only the things that have been depicted beautifully. And if it’s not depicted, it’s not seen. It never enters the imagination. It becomes a nothing” (page 209). How does this manifest in his own art, as it does (or does not) represent his grief and guilt over Evelyn’s death? Does his nonrepresentational style make Evelyn’s memory more or less of a “nothing”? Consider the images placed throughout the novel meant to illustrate Jack’s art.

Elizabeth’s ancestors use a variety of tactics to get ahead in business—mostly manipulation. In what ways do these men embody the plight of America?

Is their work any different from the landscape artists Jack looks up to?

How do art and science intersect in the novel? Consider the strategy and motives behind Jack’s non-photos and the creativity of Elizabeth’s placebo experiments at Wellness.

What is the difference between the affirmations that Brandie’s Community Corps believe in and Elizabeth’s placebo work at Wellness?

How does the city of Chicago change and transform over the course of the book? What inspiration do Jack and Elizabeth take from this place where they emigrated to, to dissolve their connections to their hometowns?

Benjamin predicts that the internet—specifically hypertext—will free readers “from the hegemony of the book” (page 311); on the internet, “there’s no gatekeeper. No overlord telling you what to do. You pick your own way through the story, navigating a sea of information, constructing personal meaning out of a big constellation of meanings” (page 312). Does the novel suggest this is true, or do people make grand meanings of their lives even without the internet? What forms and media do these stories unfold in, and how are they shaped by the internet? Consider Jack’s entrée into photography and Lawrence’s attempt to seek connection after his cancer diagnosis.

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Why is Jack so troubled when he sees that the theories of art and society he prescribed to as a young man have been adopted by his father in his Facebook screeds?

What is Lawrence looking for on Facebook? What might have happened differently if he hadn't encountered Jack on the platform, friended him, and then was unfriended by him?

What do you think really happened to Evelyn the night she died—who was to “blame,” Ruth or Jack? Did she seem to prophesy her own demise?

Consider Jack's reflection on his tattoo—and the nature of the self: “He realized that his current self—which seemed to him pretty stable and suitable and more or less true—was no more true than his younger self. Someday another person would emerge, a total stranger, and around him new friends would emerge and a new city would emerge and a new wife and a new son would emerge and they'd be an entirely new family” (page 408). How are Elizabeth and Jack totally different by the end of the book? What parts of them remain the same?

Though they have very different material upbringings, Jack and Elizabeth seem to play similar emotional roles in their families—especially regarding the ways Jack's mother and Elizabeth's father deal

(or fail to deal) with their own insecurities. How do these roles play out in their marriage, in their work lives, and as parents? What coping mechanisms do you imagine Toby developing in response to his parents' personalities? Consider Elizabeth's reflection: “This, it turned out, was the most savage, most hurtful thing about being a parent: it wasn't just coming face-to-face with all your own shortcomings and inadequacies, but it was also seeing those shortcomings embodied in your child” (page 175).

What was the impact of learning more of Jack's and Elizabeth's pasts later in the novel, as opposed to in the beginning? How might your impressions of them been different if you knew their childhood stories earlier?

Per Toby's Minecraft universe, “Diamond was the strongest stuff there was, sure, but sometimes the made-up things [netherine] were even stronger” (page 589). Where does this idea prove to be true in the novel—and in your life experiences? What does this suggest about the value of both art and the placebo effect in supporting our human frailties?

A Q&A with NATHAN HILL



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► Was there a particular event or idea that was the genesis of *Wellness*?

I have this group of good friends I travel with every summer, a bunch of writers and poets and teachers, and every year we all rent a house close to the ocean and spend a week at the beach. We've been doing this every summer for many years, and in 2014 we were in Cape Cod for the week, and at some point during the visit it struck me that our conversations had, somewhere along the way, changed. Whereas in our twenties we talked mostly about books, now in our thirties we talked mostly about health. It was weird, how suddenly everyone had new and strong opinions about various exercise routines or diet plans. One person was intermittent fasting. Someone else was on a cleanse. Someone had taken up hot yoga. Someone was doing interval training at varying intensities. Someone was now making pasta out of zucchini instead of flour (reason: fewer carbs). Someone else was removing the chewy centers of bagels (also carbs). Someone was now making mashed cauliflower instead of mashed potatoes (ditto, carbs). Someone insisted that a certain protein powder was more natural and therefore better than all other protein powders. Everyone was now oddly familiar with terms I'd never heard them mention in previous summers: *macronutrient* and *ancient grain* and *cold-pressed*. It was like, independent of one another, out of nowhere, we'd all developed exactly the same fetishes.

It actually made me angry, eventually, that our new gravitational center seemed to be this, the health and optimization of our bodies. In our twenties, we talked about the best books. In our thirties, we talked about the best life hacks. I did not like it.

And then at the end of the week, my wife and I were riding the ferry from Provincetown to Boston, and everyone aboard the ferry was riveted by a CNN story on the TVs above us: an American doctor had caught the Ebola virus in Liberia and would now be treated in Atlanta. Everyone was watching as this doctor was sped, via ambulance, to a waiting hospital, and the passengers around us all agreed that this was a huge mistake. We should not have let this doctor back into the country. He was too big of a risk to the rest of us, they all said. Sorry, but you gotta look out for number one. I found this appalling, but also interesting, especially after my week discussing life hacks, this strange cultural imperative: to obsess about one's own wellness so much that it actually feels correct to ignore the wellness of others. It was like a surge in self-care had coincided with a retreat in empathy. An increase in individual responsibility had met a decrease in collective responsibility. And maybe that explained our newfound interest in diet and exercise: if you don't think anyone else is going to take care of you, I suppose you have to do the job yourself. Maybe it was all just a very rational response to

widespread mistrust and systemic failure. I started writing a story exploring this tension, which, many years later, and after many twists and turns, became *Wellness*.

► **The novel begins in the underground art scene in Chicago in the nineties. What about that time and place interested you?**

I have such romantic and nostalgic feelings about that period. I was a college kid then, in love with all the music coming out of Chicago: Liz Phair and the Smashing Pumpkins and Urge Overkill and Veruca Salt and so on. I was going to school in Iowa, and I would sometimes travel with friends to Chicago—our closest big city—and we’d visit the bars and bookstores of Wicker Park and pretend to belong there.

I was aware even then of a certain troubling paradox: that the Wicker Park scene was self-consciously indie, that it despised and resented mainstream or commercial attention. It was a screw-the-man kind of attitude, a don’t-be-a-sheep type of vibe that was extremely attractive to the disaffected Gen X twenty-year-old that I was at the time. I wanted to be a screw-the-man person too! But I also understood that the only reason I was even aware of Wicker Park was because I was exactly the kind of mainstream music fan that the neighborhood aficionados deeply disdained. It was the kind of situation that presents certain challenges to your identity: you pretend to be someone you’re not, to fit into a place that doesn’t exactly want you.

I found that paradox useful for the two main characters of *Wellness*, who have left home to reinvent themselves in Chicago, trying to fit into a new neighborhood and a new relationship and a whole new self. They’re trying to fit themselves into the story they tell about themselves, which is exactly what I was doing in my twenties, and something I think most people do throughout their lives, to a greater or lesser extent: who we say we are, and who we think we are, and who we actually are—these things are never exactly, perfectly aligned.

► **Can you talk a little about Jack’s specific art and photography?**

Many years ago I saw an exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago on “cameraless photography” that I found really beautiful and interesting. It featured artists using the processes of photographic production to create art that was at the intersection of photography and printmaking and painting and plain old chemistry. My favorite pieces were called “chemigrams,” for which the artist exposed photographic paper to various reagents—chemical developers and fixers and assorted resists like wax or honey or basically anything else you can think of—to create these evocative and striking abstract images that stretched the limits of what could fairly be called a “photograph.”



And I guess it was pretty memorable because, years later, when I was writing the character of Jack, I decided that this was exactly the kind of art he should make. But of course in order to describe it accurately, I needed to actually do it. So I bought several boxes of old and expired photo paper, built a whole darkroom setup in my garage, and made hundreds of my own chemigrams. It actually became a little hobby of mine during the pandemic. I came to really enjoy the process—putting a sheet of brilliantly white photo paper into a tray, filling

the tray with water, then adding drops of chemical developer that diffused into the bath and darkened the paper wherever they touched, the shade growing ever darker the longer the reaction persisted—it was all quite beautiful to watch. It was a kind of painting done with chemistry and time. Eventually I decided that examples of Jack’s art should appear in the book. So there are a few chemigrams in *Wellness*, which were actually done by me, in my garage.

► **At the center of *Wellness* are Jack and Elizabeth, a couple we come to know backward and forward in time who it seems at times may not really know each other at all. Can you talk about how their story unfolds in the novel?**

I wanted to tell a love story that was a little bit different. I wanted to tell a story about a couple, but this story would have three main characters: a husband, a wife, and time. It’s a story about the fundamental challenge of marriage: that the spouse who said “I do” is not exactly the same person five, ten, twenty years later. And you are not the same person. And the world is not the same world. Everything changes, and yet at most weddings, couples still make this insane promise: that amid life’s inevitable churn, their love will never change.

Which causes all sorts of trouble down the road.

Have you ever heard the story of the Ship of Theseus? It’s an old thought experiment, first described by Plutarch. The story goes like this: The hero Theseus returns victoriously to Athens, and

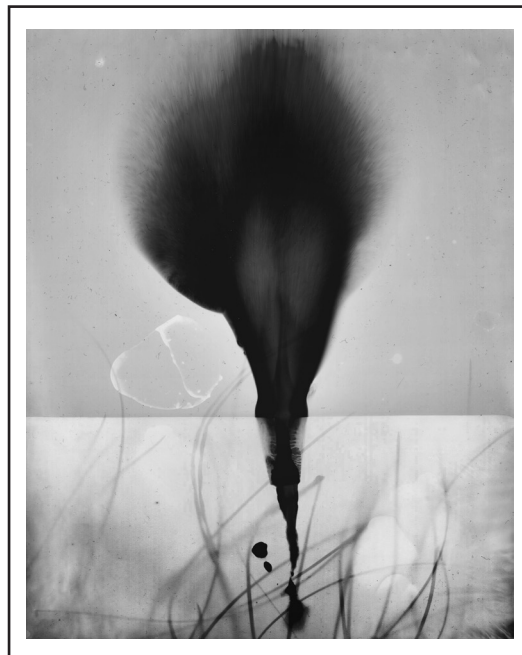
every year thereafter the Athenians commemorate his victory by taking his famous ship for a sail. But of course, over time, the ship needs minor repairs, first replacing this plank, then that plank, then this mast, then that oar, and after centuries of this, eventually

not a single piece of the original ship remains. Which begs the question: Is this still the Ship of Theseus? Is it the same ship, even though literally everything that made the ship has been replaced? And it struck me that people are sometimes like that too, and so are marriages, and neighborhoods, and maybe even countries: their changes feel minor individually, but massive collectively. The big question that *Wellness* often asks is: How much can something change before it’s no longer fundamentally itself?

In order to dramatize this, I used a structure that was flexible with time and chronology. The story is told nonlinearly, and years can pass between chapters. We bop back and forth in time, seeing our couple during their romantic courtship in one chapter, then during their midlife lull in the next, then we see them as children in the next, and so on. I wanted to give the reader the experience that one has in marriage: that you get to know your spouse both forward and backward at the same time. You get to know them forward as you live with them and observe their habits and various tics and

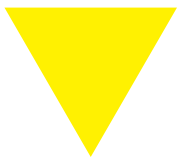
eccentricities. And you get to know them backward as you meet old friends, hear old stories, see where they grew up, learn the secrets of their past.

And in so doing, you can achieve a kind of synthesis: *This is who my spouse is*. And as soon as you believe that, they slip away from you again.



Listen Along

Stream Jack's nostalgic
nineties playlist on
Spotify, featuring:



Liz Phair

Mazzy Star

Tori Amos

The Cur

The Breeders

The Lemonheads

Pavement

Morphine

The Smithereens

Dinosaur Jr.

+ MORE!

SCAN THIS CODE TO LISTEN:



Suggested Reading

Pride and Prejudice
Jane Austen

The Circle
Dave Eggers

The Marriage Plot
Jeffrey Eugenides

Fates and Furies
Lauren Groff

The Nix
Nathan Hill

Hello Beautiful
Ann Napolitano

The Overstory
Richard Powers

Hope
Andrew Ridker

Normal People
Sally Rooney

Lake Success
Gary Shteyngart

Commitment
Mona Simpson

My Name Is Lucy Barton
by Elizabeth Strout

A Spool of Blue Thread
Anne Tyler

*Tomorrow, and Tomorrow,
and Tomorrow*
Gabrielle Zevin