

We Are the Light by Matthew Quick Discussion Guide

1. Lucas writes that Karl, his analyst, was the first person besides his wife to ever say to him “I love you” and mean it. Karl loved him in the way that “the best part of my soul loves the best part of your soul,” a phrase which becomes a refrain throughout the book. What is the power of this type of love as seen in the book, and how is it distinct from romantic or familial love? How is it different from the love that is earned through one’s actions?
2. In the aftermath of the movie theater tragedy, Lucas is consoled by his vision of the victims turning into angels, and takes comfort from the following visitations of his wife in the form of an angel. He believes that it would “be cathartic for everyone to understand that their loved ones did not suffer and were not afraid, but were instantly transformed into higher beings who were far more beautiful and enlightened than humans could ever be.” In which ways is this angelic secret constructive to Lucas, and in which ways is it detrimental?
3. “I wish there was something we could do, other than be angry,” the survivors say to Lucas in the months after the tragedy. How is anger treated in the book? Can it ever be a force for good?
4. Lucas can’t bring himself to return to his work at the high school, so Eli seeks him out at home. Lucas writes that Eli’s anguish “made me feel guilty about abandoning him and all of the students who relied on me the way I relied on you, Karl. The irony is not lost on me.” How does the help that Eli needs from Lucas compare to the help that Lucas needs from the absent Karl? How did you feel about Karl as you read the book, and how did your feelings change by the end?
5. Sandra Coyle urges Lucas to give up helping Eli make his amateur film project and come work for her anti-gun political crusade instead. She tells Lucas, “If you want to be part of a *real* solution, if you want to *really* honor Darcy, you’ve got to put childish things aside and be a man.” How does her idea of “being a man” differ from the ideas expressed by Lucas, Karl, Isaiah, and others?
6. Lucas goes to great lengths to help Eli carry out his monster movie project, guiding and partnering with him to make the whole thing possible. But before they hatch a plan of action, Lucas helps lift Eli’s pain by simply keeping him company without saying a word: “We sat in silence for a long time, quietly looking at each other. . . . As I sat in the tent with young Eli, I could feel his pain and frustration and loneliness leaving his body.” What does this book teach us about the different ways of helping someone to heal? How does the rest of the town later pitch in to help Lucas?

7. Lucas insists that “No one in our movie is good or bad. . . . Just true depictions of whole people, each with both a shadow and a light side.” The fictional scripted movie doesn’t match the messiness of reality, or does it? In real life, Lucas still refuses to vilify Jacob Hansen, because he doesn’t believe that anyone, even Jacob, is entirely bad. Do the other characters in the novel agree with him? Why do you agree or disagree?

8. In the eyes of many of the townspeople, Lucas is Jacob’s opposite, Majestic’s savior and white knight. How does this hero worship affect Lucas, who is struggling with his complicated feelings about what he did to stop the massacre? Lucas himself holds a worshipful view of Karl, believing that he holds all the answers that Lucas needs in his wounded state. What do you think are the downsides of idolizing people who are all too human?

9. Other characters draw a hard distinction between Jacob and his seventeen victims, but Lucas is firmly attached to the number eighteen—he compulsively walks eighteen miles in a day, he circles around Karl’s house eighteen times, and he writes eighteen letters total. He even convinces the survivors to agree to “an in-memoriam section listing the names of all eighteen people who were killed at the Majestic Theater, including Jacob Hansen.” How do you think this reflects Lucas’s search for closure? Does the book suggest that all healing requires forgiveness, and do you agree?

10. Lucas is profoundly shaped by his trusting, tender relationships with the other men in his life, and the vital importance of healthy masculinity is a major theme in the book. Yet not to be overlooked are the female characters in the book, who play an equally important role in helping Lucas and the town on the journey to wholeness and healing. Consider all the big and small ways in which the women step up: what is their part, and how is it complementary to the man-on-man healing approach?

11. In the novel, many people who are not related by blood extend unconditional love and support toward one another. Many biological relationships, such as between Lucas and his parents, Jill and her father, and Eli and his mother, are twisted and toxic rather than truly caring and nurturing. What does it mean to treat someone like family? What is special about a chosen family, and what does the book say about belonging to and taking care of a community?

12. In addition to Eli’s monster movie, the other film that holds great meaning in the book is the cinematic classic *It’s a Wonderful Life*, which was beloved by the town until tragedy struck. How does the story of *It’s a Wonderful Life* connect to the story of the monster movie and the overarching story of the novel?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Vote on a favorite classic movie to watch together. Keeping in mind what you learned from the book about how movies are created, what did you notice this time? Reflect on the art of filmmaking and the experience of watching.
2. Set aside some time for individual journaling and invite each member to write a private letter of their choice, in the spirit of Lucas's letters to Karl. Members can choose to share their letters. How does it feel to put thoughts into words?
3. The close-knit townspeople of Majestic, PA, come together to take care of their own. Is there a way that your club can give back to the community? Sign up for a group volunteer opportunity and enjoy a meal afterward at a local diner like the Cup Of Spoons.

A Conversation with Matthew Quick

Q: How did you decide to write *We Are the Light* as an epistolary novel?

A: I got 100% sober in June of 2018 and was immediately rewarded with crippling writer's block. I'd sit at the computer all day and struggle to complete a paragraph. And the paragraph would not be good. This went on for years. My wife, Alicia, began encouraging me to write another epistolary novel. She pointed out that I was still able to write letters. I've always had pen pals. I enjoy writing long letters and emails to friends. I resisted Alicia's suggestion. But when the writer, Nickolas Butler, echoed my wife's opinion without my having shared it with him, I finally went up to my office, typed the words "Dear Karl," and was off. After years of not being able to write, I was suddenly writing happily for eight to twelve hours a day. A lot happened during those years of writer's block, including my entering into Jungian analysis. I'm not suggesting that writing epistolary novels is some sort of magic cure for writer's block. But the intimacy of letter writing helped me find my way into the heart of this story, which is perhaps my most intimate to date.

Q: The loving bonds between Lucas, Eli, and the other male characters in the book are expressed loud and clear. Why do you think this is important to show?

A: The loving relationship I had with my grandfather probably saved my life when I was young. I grew up at a time when—and in a community where—men were not really encouraged to be openly intimate with each other. There wasn't a lot of male hugging going on back then. Nor were there too many male-only heartfelt discussions. My grandfather was a WWII veteran and he wasn't exactly warm and fuzzy

either, but he held my hand every morning at the breakfast table and prayed for me with an earnestness that felt sincere. I also remember being saved by sweaty male hugs on the basketball court. These were, of course, justified by difficult baskets made and victories over our enemies, but as a boy starved for male affection, I made do with them. And during my recent depressions and anxiety battles, a few of my best male friends really showed up for me. I regularly have conversations with male confidants about my feelings and aspirations and dreams and fears and hurts. I have found that many men are hungry for such talks and light up when you give them the chance to participate in such experiences. I think there are a lot of lonely, hurting men out there. Lonely hurting men pushed to extremes sometimes do horrific unthinkable things—like Jacob Hansen does in the movie house. But when lonely hurting men are loved by their communities and given the chance to bond in healthy ways with other men, sometimes they contribute beauty and unity to their communities—like Eli Hansen does. I would like there to be more Elis in the world than Jacobs. That’s why it’s important to let men know that we love them and that they are allowed to love us back.

Q: How did Jungian analysis come to play a starring role in *We Are the Light*?

A: I had been Jung-curious for a long time. And during my most recent dark night of the soul, when my worldview was perhaps at its bleakest, my wife encouraged me to give the *This Jungian Life* podcast a listen. When I did, I heard Jungian analysts Deborah C. Stewart, Lisa Marchiano, and Joseph R. Lee discuss many topics through a Jungian lens, as well as analyze the dreams of listeners. I binged the T.J.L. archive and became more and more interested in Jung’s ideas. Finally, I found an analyst and entered into Jungian analysis myself. To say that my analysis has radically reshaped who I am, would be a gross understatement. Since 2014, I had also been trying to write a novel about a tragedy at a historic, cathedral-like movie house, but could never figure out how to tell the tale. It was only when I started applying a Jungian lens that the story began to flow out of me in a way that felt meaningful.

Q: Lucas finds his calling as a school counselor for teenagers. Have you ever worked with young people? What do you think teens like Eli need from the adults around them?

A: From the fall of 1996 to the summer of 2004, I worked with teenagers. I taught, coached, counseled, chaperoned, and spent the majority of my time around young adults. One of my undergraduate professors once told me that what children need most from adults is proof that one can make it to adulthood and be okay. At the time, I took “okay” to mean adult life could be enjoyable and honorable and purposeful—that you didn’t have to be miserable or abusive or settle for something you never really wanted. The deeper I go into my Jungian work, the more I believe that “okay” means remaining whole in adulthood without splitting off essential parts of one’s identity. Or if those parts have gotten temporarily split off by life’s hard knocks, we can show young people that it’s possible to reclaim those split-off parts

and become whole again, albeit through difficult inner work. And when you talk honestly and sincerely to teens about this possibility—becoming who they were always meant to be—their eyes almost always light up.

Q: How long did it take to write *We Are the Light*?

A: Like I wrote above, I had the basic idea in 2014 and—for seven years—had been trying to write my way into a voice and an opening. But—again, after years of my subconscious working on it—the first draft of what became this novel was written in under a month. I got pretty obsessed and was working seven days a week and writing for eight to twelve hours a day. My wife and I edited additional drafts together for a few more weeks. And then my editor, Jofie Ferrari-Adler, provided many valuable insights and really helped me polish.

Q: The monster movie screenplay that Eli and Lucas write is an extremely personal piece of art. Was writing *We Are the Light* a similarly personal experience for you?

A: Yes. Although, the novel is in no way meant to be autobiographical. I never experienced a tragedy in a movie house. Lucas Goodgame doesn't struggle with alcohol abuse. But we both have bonded pretty intensely with our Jungian analysts. We both have relied on the therapeutic value of art and story. We both have had places deep inside of ourselves shatter. And we've both benefited from the healing properties of friendships. I've also written screenplays, although never a monster movie.

Q: What is the most interesting research you did for the book?

A: My parents have a home in Ambler, PA. Whenever I'd visit, I'd go to the historic Ambler Theater with my dad and try to dream up the plot for my movie theater novel. Even though the theater in *We Are the Light*—the Majestic Theater—is fiction, I had the general look of the Ambler Theater in mind when I wrote the book. I'm in a two-man movie club. The other man is my buddy, Kent, who has made horror films in and around south Jersey and loves monster movies. Kent gave me a list of old monster films to watch, all of which I found interesting and great fun. I particularly dug Jacques Tourneur's *Cat People* and *The Leopard Man*. Again, my deep dive into all things Carl Jung would take the prize for most interesting.

Q: Was there a scene in the book that surprised you as you were writing it?

A: In chapter 17, during an evening rainstorm, a soaked-to-the-bone Tony shows up at Lucas's home and then begins to emotionally unburden himself on the couch. We learn that the Majestic Theater tragedy created a rift between Tony and Mark, but the film project and working with Eli allows Tony to believe in

his community again, which in turn helps him reconnect with his partner too. It's a tender and vulnerable moment. When I had the impulse for a rain-soaked Tony knocking on Lucas's door, I didn't know what Tony was going to say once Lucas let him in. So that surprised me.

Q: *We Are the Light* plays homage to cinematic magic as well as the real behind-the-scenes work of moviemaking. What did you want to capture about the moviegoing experience? Have you ever been behind the camera in real life?

A: I've never been behind a movie camera. I spent a day on the *Silver Linings Playbook* movie set. And I've worked with directors and actors and producers on several screenplays. But the book was more informed by the many hours I've spent in dark movie houses gazing up at the great beam of light dancing on the screen. In the first half of my life, whenever I was feeling depressed or anxious, I almost always did one of two things (when I wasn't writing): drink alcohol or go to the movies. While drinking almost always led to a worse state of mind, the cinema often buoyed me through rough spells in a way that was positive and constructive. It's where I went to dream, to cheer, to cry and laugh, to study the human condition, and to learn about storytelling—how you do it and why. The best movies activate something deep within us and help us get in touch with our feelings. We often call it being moved, but I think it's so much more than that. Maybe it's being reconnected with what makes us feel most alive—the transcendent spark within all of us. The movie-going experience—when the film is good—lifts us above the everyday grind. It can remind us of what's possible. It can encourage us to be our best selves.

Q: Do you have any unwritten ideas about how Lucas, Jill, Eli, and the other townspeople of Majestic lead their lives after the story ends?

A: I think the Majestic Theater has been sanctified once again by the end of the novel and that everyone will continue to have cinematic experiences, despite the tragedy. And that's the metaphor, right? There is real evil in the world and it wants to rob us of the good. But if we look with the right eyes, we will see that there is always more good than evil, which is primarily the reason why such things as love and friendship and community are even possible at all. I think Lucas and Jill will take care of each other, just as Darcy would have wanted it. And I think Eli will continue to untether himself from the post-tragedy womb that Lucas and the town of Majestic create for him. Eli will go out into the world and have his life's adventure, leaving boyhood behind and becoming a man. And when he's far enough along on his journey—when his adult identity is established—he will return in some way to Lucas and Jill and Tony and Mark and the town of Majestic. They'll be waiting with open arms, ready and willing to celebrate the first-half-of-life completion of his wondrous maturation process.