



We recommend discussing *Bowlaway* over three sessions of one hour each. We also suggest leaving one week between sessions.

Session 1: Pages 1-128

Session 2: Pages 129- 254

Session 3: Pages 255-371

Use the prompts listed under each session to help encourage conversation. *Prompts contain spoilers*, so we do not recommend reading them until you have finished reading each section of the book.

Before beginning the first session, read the ground rules aloud to the group. For concerns or specific questions regarding speech or expression, The University of Texas policy on speech, expression, and:

<https://catalog.utexas.edu/general-information/appendices/appendix-c/speech-expression-and-assembly/>

Section 13-302 Sub-section F is particularly pertinent.

An essential part of higher education is to learn to separate substantive argument from personal offense, and to express even the deepest disagreements within standards of civility that reflect mutual respect, understanding, and sensitivity among the diverse population within the University and in the larger society. These are community norms, even though they cannot be enforced by disciplinary rules.

Remember that the prompts are just that. They should be used to help stimulate thought and conversation when needed but *allow the discussion to develop organically*.

Sometimes conversations can wander too far astray from the book, so it may be necessary at times to remind people to stay within the general parameters of the book. The prompts can help rein the conversation back in.

Ground Rules

- In advance of meeting, keep track of what you read. Highlight or underline passages that you may like to refer to in a group discussion. Use tabs or bookmarks to make it easier to find those passages. In addition or alternatively, you might use a notebook to jot down your thoughts as you read along with respective page numbers.
- Help create a brave space. Work together to help each other feel safe, and willing to share thoughts and speak up.
- Do not get ahead of the story. If you've read farther than the pages assigned for the session, be aware and respectful of the fact that others may have not read that far.
- Do not shout people down, speak over one another, or interrupt.
- Be sure to ask questions of others, rather than only sharing your thoughts and opinions.
- Use "I" statements in expressing your own thoughts and feelings rather than making assumptions about others.
- Limit your own comments to two minutes each time you speak to ensure other people have time to share.
- Aim for equitable talking time. If you find yourself speaking up most often then experiment with stepping back and listening; if you find that you are staying silent most of the time, then experiment with speaking up more often.
- Disagreement and critical dialogue should be expected and recognized as part of a healthy dialogue, but be considerate of other people's perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences.
- Respect one another's voice, perspective, and time.
- Be inquisitive. Ask questions that require deep thought and spark interesting conversation.
- Be empathetic. Remember that people have different life and educational experience. Some people are more comfortable expressing themselves than other. Be patient and help each other communicate.

Session 1 Prompts (Pages 1-128)

If applicable, make introductions. Each person should introduce themselves, give some background on what they do for UT, and a little personal information if they are comfortable doing so.

What is everyone's background with reading fiction? Is there anyone for whom this is their first novel?

Has anyone read other work by Elizabeth McCracken? If so, how does it compare so far?

What is everyone's initial reactions so far?

Is anyone from New England or have any experience there? Does this story capture that setting and people?

Who knows or knew about candlepin bowling? Can someone explain it to the others or perhaps have a discussion about what you think it is? If not, this might be a good assignment for next time.

The story opens in a cemetery and we're given the impression that Bertha Truitt may have just materialized there. It's a mythical or folklore style. Bertha continues to be a mythical figure ("Bertha Truitt confounded people. She was two things at once... People began to dream of her," page 9.) Why do you think McCracken made that choice for this story? What effect did it have on you as a reader?

Of all games to focus on, why candlepin bowling ("nobody has ever won a perfect string," page 7)?

What are your thoughts about McCracken's portrayal of women in this story?

What are your thoughts about McCracken's portrayal of an interracial marriage in the early 1900s?

Is there some symbolism in having Bertha give birth to Minna between two floors, or is it just striking imagery?

What was your reaction while reading about the molasses flood and Bertha's demise?

Discuss Joe Wear's discovery of Leviticus Sprague's death (p.122).

What are some passages, descriptions, or plot points that stood out for you?

Session 2 Prompts (Pages 129- 254)

Why does Joe Wear say (to himself) that he is Nahum Truitt (pp. 132, 133)?

What were your initial impressions of Nahum Truitt when he is introduced into the story (p. 134)? Did your impression change?

Women and the treatment of women are a central theme in *Bowlaway*. Discuss Nahum's decision and order to prohibit women from the alley.

What are your thoughts about the relationship between LuEtta and Moses Mood (p.144...)?

When Nahum challenged LuEtta in bowling and they made the bet, where did you think or hope the story was going to go?

What is your opinion of Margaret Vanetten (Truitt)? Is she a sympathetic character? Is she a likely partner to Nahum? She seems quite desperate for love. Perhaps this is due to her upbringing (p. 175).

What role does the Bertha doll play in this story? Is it a McGuffin? Why was it created? What is going on with Arch re-discovering it and holding it so intimately on page 189?

On page 197, the truth of Nahum's and Bertha's relationship is revealed. Did you suspect this to be the case? Were you surprised?

Do you recognize any of the characters in this story from your own life? Family? Friends? Co-workers?

McCracken occasionally leaps out of the timeline for just a flash. For instance, on page 210, she writes, "But his brother, Arch: even years later, when he was dead of misadventure..." and page 223, "It was among her effects, when she died in New York, fifty years later." This is unusual even for omniscient point-of-view. How do you feel about this choice? Does it add something to the story? Take something away?

What do you think about the relationship between Roy and Arch? How did you feel about Roy covering for the fact that Arch was drinking to the point of inebriation at age eleven?

There are a number of supernatural elements in this story (e.g., dead people appearing in dreams, the Salford Devil, ghosts). What does this do for the story? Does it add depth or intrigue?

What are some passages, descriptions, or plot points that stood out for you?

Session 3 Prompts (Pages 255-371)

Who is the central character of this story? Is it Bertha? She dies on page 77? Who do we as readers spend the most time with? Is there someone you would have liked to know more about; spend more time with? Minna, for instance, appears fleetingly but is rich in character?

What is your impression of Roy Truitt as a college lecturer? Is this something you would have expected of him?

Discuss the family dynamic among Arch, Cracker, and Margaret. In particular, what are your thoughts on Arch's infidelity and Cracker's and Margaret's reactions (p.298...)?

Compare and contrast the unusual celebrity achieved by Arch and Minna. Keep race and gender in mind during discussion.

What does "not ever" mean (or do) in this sentence: "Jeptha Arrison hadn't been born in a bowling alley, not ever, but Arch Truitt was" (p. 313)?

The lives of Margaret and Arch come to tragic and unsettling ends (pp. 345-353). How do you feel about what happened to them?

The bowling alley is a character of sorts in this story. It also provides a central setting and helps to illustrate the passage of time. Did it help provide context to you as a reader. How did you feel about this place? Consider the descriptions of Cracker's changes on page 321, Arch's renovations on pages 283-289, and Nahum's changes from Bertha's original vision. In the end it is unwanted and even despised (p. 365).

How did you feel about Bertha had left Truitt's Alleys to Joe Wear (p. 339), and all that happened before Joe learned of his inheritance (p. 357...)? It allowed to learn much more about him and the interesting life he had lived.

One of the last pieces of folklore in the novel is the Truitt gold. It was also a device that ran through the whole story. How did you like this "buried treasure" element?

The novel begins by describing Bertha in the cemetery, "Her limbs were willy-nilly. Even her skirt looked broken in two along its central axis, though it was merely divided, for cycling," and ends describing the Bertha doll atop a pinball machine, "Her skirt was split down the middle, for cycling; her limbs were willy-nilly." Why bookend the story in this way?

What are some passages, descriptions, or plot points that stood out for you?

What are your overall impressions of the novel? How did you like how the story ended? What did you like? What did you view more critically?