

—DISCUSSION GUIDE—

for use with Whispers in the Branches by Brandy Heineman

1. Ruby claims the valuables from her sister's home are under lock and key, but Abby is able to figure out how to access the room and finds it full of black mold. Scripture warns against storing treasures on earth, where rust (or in this case, black mold) destroys and thieves (or Abby) break in and steal. Discuss your understanding of treasure in heaven. How is it collected? What is its value?
2. Both Abby and Ruby interpret signals from the physical world (footsteps on the roof, a flash of light) to create belief systems that support what they wish to believe. Have you ever thought an event was a sign, only to become less certain later? Discuss the dangers of incorrectly correlating events in this present life to the spiritual world.
3. Abby's mother insists that "Everyone deserves a name." What does this mean to you? Do you agree or disagree?
4. Although her life has been unfruitful in some ways, Ruby's concern for her legacy has become an idol to her. It is common to desire admiration, but Jesus Himself warned against loving the approval of others (Luke 20:46-47). What are some practical ways to build a legacy while maintaining humility?
5. Abby's passion for genealogy leads her to dark places. Scripture admonishes us to consider our ways (Haggai 1:5). Under what circumstances might some of your hobbies, interests, or passions lead you astray?
6. Greg goes to considerable trouble and expense to convince Abby to come home. Would you call his trip a success or failure? Why?
7. The story includes a number of doors and locks. The Bible mentions more than once knocking at a door in reference to a relationship with Christ: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me" (Revelation 3:20), and, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7; Luke 11:9). Which side of the door are you on right now? Who is knocking? How do you know?
8. Ruby believes that the dead live on in memory; Will tells Abby that their efforts are better spent on the living. To what extent, if at all, is memory of past generations a responsibility?
9. At the locomotive museum, Abby muses whether Atlanta would have grown as great if it had never burned. Heartbreak often becomes the channel of God's blessing. Have you experienced this in your own life? How does this reflect God's redemptive power?
10. A grudge spanning generations of Abby's family bears an impact on her present life. Scripture warns believers not to bite and devour one another, that we would not be consumed by one another (Galatians 5:15). How might Abby's life have been different had her grandmother chosen to break ranks with her own father's prejudice against Northerners?

11. Ruby attempts to cover up parts of history; Abby seeks to record it faithfully but often longs for the ability to change the past. In the end, Ruby surrenders the burden that hampered her relationship with Christ, and Abby is on a trajectory to begin her walk with Him. Discuss how the pain each of them experiences might be considered to "work together for good for those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28).

12. Although Abby is desperately curious about her father, she feels burdened to respect her mother's privacy in order to keep her promise. Her lack of information leaves her ill-equipped when she does meet him. Do promises made to the dead remain binding? Are there appropriate times to break them?

13. Abby's relationship with her father is in an ambiguous state at the end of the story. Do you believe she will make amends with him in the future? Imagine the content of their next conversation.

14. By the end of the story, Abby recognizes that faith in Christ may not improve the external circumstances of the believers she has known, but each experiences the peace that surpasses all comprehension (Philippians 4:7), and that peace constitutes the proof she has sought throughout. Discuss your experience (as a spectator or a recipient) of supernatural peace.

15. Although W. C. "Christie" Sosebee 's eternity was secure in Christ, what would you consider his fatal flaw? Discuss how such flaws damage one's testimony or relationship with God.

16. Greg struggles to show love to Abby when she is neither receptive to that love nor particularly lovable. Discuss how expressions of romantic love (*eros*) might mirror expressions of God's love (*agape*). Conversely, how are they different?

17. Abby takes no comfort in trite condolences and sees them as "easy answers." Do you empathize with her, or does even an inadequate effort to comfort those who mourn have value? Discuss a time you've experienced when words fell short.

