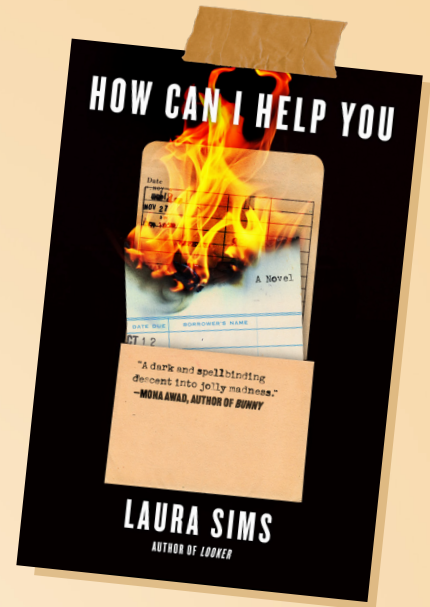


HOW CAN I HELP YOU DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1.

How Can I Help You is set primarily in a library, which is described by Margo as a quiet, anonymous, and orderly haven.

Alternatively, Yvonne describes it as a lively community center. Whose description is right, and why? Do you recognize your own local library in either or both descriptions?

2.

Margo and Patricia first meet when Patricia lands the job at the library's reference desk. What significance does her new assignment bear in terms of how the story unfolds?

3.

Despite how they present publicly, Patricia and Margo are immediately drawn to each other. Why do you think each becomes the object of the other's fascination?

4.

The novel alternates between two first-person perspectives, and both narrators demonstrate an affinity for the fictitious. Discuss the extent to which both are unreliable, and how you parsed out the truth from each as you read. What purpose do their fabrications serve in their lives? In what ways are both characters playing a role in their own and each other's stories?

5.

Both Margo's and Patricia's occupations shed light on the way they view themselves—as do their private pastimes. What qualities might librarians and nurses have in common? What about novelists and serial killers? Why do you think the characters are drawn to these particular jobs and pastimes? Why do you think author Laura Sims chose these for them?

6.

Among her many obsessions, Margo depends on her ritualistic hot-water baths. What do these baths do for her? What do they symbolize? Share with the group your own relaxation ritual.

7.

Patricia is an aspiring novelist. To what extent does the setting of the library fuel Patricia's imagination? Discuss the moral grounds for writing about another person. In what ways does Patricia become increasingly morally ambiguous? How do her actions contribute to the novel's culminating chaos?

8.

Both Margo and Patricia tend to their novels—Margo, the one she is reading, and Patricia, the one she is writing—in the same way a mother would care for her baby. Discuss the role these novels play in How Can I Help You, and how they influence the characters' motivations.

9.

From the beginning, we are told Margo simply wants to be of service to others. In reference to the title, discuss the multiple ways in which caretaking takes form. How does Margo's particular way of finding pleasure and power through "helping" subvert the conventional idea of women as caretakers?

10.

What do you think comes next for Patricia?