

The Ghost of Valhalla

Book Club Leader's Guide

A conversation about evidence, longing, consent, and love across time

Pilot edition | R. A. Portnoy

A neurosurgeon encounters a woman whose life ended decades before his began. Their connection draws a research institute into the question of what consciousness might become after death, while other lives at the institute reveal the costs of grief and the temptation to control what cannot be held. This guide helps a book club explore the novel's choices and mysteries. It does not require members to share a belief about ghosts or the afterlife.

Before you meet

Read the novel through the epilogue. This guide discusses the ending. Invite members to mark one scene they found moving and one they questioned. Choose six to eight prompts below; the group need not cover them all. The chapter references are more reliable than page numbers across editions.

Suggested length: 75 to 90 minutes. A group of five to twelve gives everyone room to speak. Members may pass on any question, especially those touching on death or bereavement.

A 90 minute conversation

0–10 minutes Each person names one image, choice, or unanswered question that stayed with them.

10–25 minutes Ben, Elise, and the first evidence.

25–45 minutes The Institute and the ethics of contact.

45–65 minutes Love, loss, and the lives around Ben.

65–80 minutes The ending and epilogue.

80–90 minutes Each person offers one interpretation they changed or want to reconsider.

Opening the room

You might say: “Tonight we can disagree about what is real in the world of the book, what counts as convincing evidence, and whether the characters’ choices are loving. Let’s return to scenes when we disagree. No one needs to explain a personal loss or defend a belief about death.”

Ask for observations before judgments: “Which scene led you there?” Let a minority reading stand without taking a vote. If someone shares a painful experience, thank them and give them the choice to continue or move on.

1 A physician meets the inexplicable

Begin with Chapters 1–6, from Ben’s care for Tommy and Mrs. Rudolf to the cemetery excursion, the epitaph, and the registry.

- Before Elise appears, what does Ben’s treatment of patients tell you about him? Where does that care fail in his marriage to Susan?
- Which detail of the cemetery encounter most challenged your explanation of what happened? Which detail would a skeptic still question?
- Ben tests hallucination and other explanations against what he remembers sensing. What evidence would you have required before accepting his conclusion?
- The registry confirms that Elise lived. How much does that establish about the woman Ben met? Where does the book invite us to move from a fact to an interpretation?
- What changes when Ben first becomes the person whose experience needs to be believed?

2 The Institute and its claim to knowledge

Use Chapters 7–14: Margaret’s project, Marsha’s account of receptivity, Ben’s visits, the hidden evidence, and the Board’s decision.

- Does Margaret respond to Ben chiefly as a scientist, a friend, or a leader fighting to preserve her project? Point to a scene where those roles conflict.
- Marsha argues that a connection must be initiated by the deceased. What does that rule protect? Does the Institute honor it consistently?
- The Titanic ticket and other physical clues change the Board’s mind. In the logic of this story, what do they prove, and what do they leave open?
- If Ben’s account were the only evidence available, should the Institute have proceeded? Would your answer change if you were responsible for his welfare?
- Is the Institute investigating consciousness, trying to make contact, or beginning to build a service? When does its mission shift?

3 Elise as a person, not a phenomenon

Use Chapters 11–18 and 22: her mother’s illness, her writing and bakery, the locket, the rocks, and the journal.

- What does Elise want for herself beyond seeing Ben? Which scene gives her the clearest independent life?
- How do her mother’s words and the inscription “Believe in Yourself” change meaning as they pass through the story?

- Ben helps Elise's mother during an episode that her era interprets fearfully. What does his knowledge give her family, and what can it not give them?
- How does Elise's anticipation of Ben change the romance? Is their meeting freely chosen, destined, or a mixture of both?
- What does finding Elise's journal add that the laboratory could not provide?

4 Love and the limits of holding on

Use Chapters 2, 16–18, and 23. Consider Susan’s departure, Elise’s love and farewell, and Ben’s conversation with Paul and Sarah.

- Susan asks Ben for attention while she is still present. Does the novel hold him accountable for that failure after Elise enters his life?
- Elise eventually tells Ben she must go alone and asks him not to seek her. What would honoring that request require of him?
- Ben tells Paul and Sarah a version of his story that conceals who Elise was. Is that an act of care, self-protection, or a loss of intimacy?
- Sarah suggests that Elise taught Ben how to notice someone new. Does that honor Elise, soften the loss too quickly, or both?
- Can a new relationship coexist with an enduring love? What does the novel ask us to give up when we answer?

5 Who owns a passage between worlds

Use Chapters 19–22. Mason’s surveillance and offer to Evan turn the Institute’s ethical question into a struggle for control.

- Mason proposes contact whether the deceased wants it or not. Why is this more than a dispute over technology?
- Evan presents himself to Mason as vulnerable. Where did you begin to suspect he held more power than he showed?
- Could any institution govern the process in the novel without exploiting grief? What single rule would your group impose first?
- Would knowing that contact was possible make ordinary mourning easier, harder, or simply different for Michael and Janet?

6 A family and an ending

Use Chapters 17, 24, and the epilogue. Michael and Janet face Sophie’s death, later welcome Annie, and the final cemetery tour brings the strands together.

- How does Sophie’s absence shape Michael and Janet differently? What changes when they enter her room together?
- Does Annie’s birth represent renewal, a narrative consolation, or something else? How does the novel keep Sophie present?

- What did you make of the locket delivered to Annie? Is its mystery more effective than an explanation would be?
- How does the final encounter between Annie and Zachary echo Ben and Elise without simply repeating their story?
- The epilogue returns to a performed ghost story at Valhalla. What is the difference between a historical account, a family story, and an experience someone believes was real?

If the group wants to go deeper

A contested claim: Divide into two small groups. One identifies the novel's strongest evidence for contact; the other identifies the strongest unanswered question. Ask each group to state the other's position fairly before responding.

A different choice: Choose one decision by Ben, Elise, Margaret, Marsha, or Evan. Change that decision and trace two consequences for the other characters.

An unwritten scene: Imagine the conversation Susan and Ben never managed to have, or a conversation Annie might one day have with her parents about the locket. What would each person need to hear?

A passage to read aloud: Invite someone to select a brief passage from their own copy: Elise at the rocks, her farewell, Ben with Paul and Sarah, or the final tour. Ask how the language shapes the group's interpretation. Do not require anyone to perform.

Closing question

What did the novel leave you more curious about: whether consciousness survives death, whether love can survive separation, or how people choose to live with uncertainty? Why?

Pilot feedback for the leader

After the meeting, note which question produced the liveliest exchange, which felt too leading or confusing, whether members wanted more attention to a character or scene, and whether 90 minutes felt right. Send those observations, including criticism, to the author if you have agreed to participate in the pilot.

This discussion guide is for book clubs reading *The Ghost of Valhalla*. Its questions concern a work of fiction; the novel's research and historical elements should not be treated as established scientific or historical findings. © 2026 Robert Portnoy. Pilot edition.