

## Discussion Questions

# *Brush: A Novel*

## by Penn Anderson

Source: Questions provided by the author.

1. In contrast to the very colorful tale of painting and flowers, Jo is symbolized by white and Chris by black. Scenes where black and white come together are particularly important. Discuss examples of these you noticed as you read.
2. After the last chapter, what do we know (or not know) about Jo's life?
3. Whenever Chris uses the special brush, he finds himself in situations that match his creations. What happens when Chris uses the brush to paint the eyes of his self-portrait?
4. Why did Chris throw the brush in the cistern? What does this represent in his journey? Have you ever said a purposeful good-bye to a meaningful object?
5. Mai Lor is an unexpected hero of the story. How did the people in her young life shape who she became as an adult? Do you remember side characters in your own childhood who had a great impact on your path?
6. On the drive to the Bucks game, Grant brings up the Apple ad shown during the 1984 Super Bowl. "As soon as it had arrived, Jo's moment was gone." The personal computer and mobile phone would become an integral part of modern life, ultimately leading to a life like Chris has with FELL. A life like Jo's, in many ways, would never be possible again. Many of us have a deep nostalgia for a simpler, analog world. Discuss ways in which the Jo chapters indulged this nostalgia, and the ways Chris's story was a discordant foil to that feeling. In what ways was "Jo's story" a yearning inside of Chris himself?
7. How did the botanicals and the food in this book help propel the reader through the four seasons in Wisconsin? What are some of your favorite culinary or floral traditions during the year? How did these details help the two storylines overlap and connect?
8. The epigraph "Creation is a visitor" references a character rushing home, ill-prepared, out of breath from a hurried climb, to be there in time to greet an important visitor. In our story, what are the obstacles Chris had to overcome in order to climb the mountain and make it to Jill's doorway in time? What did Chris ultimately create? Where else does a mountain metaphor show up in this book? Where else did you notice doors/thresholds?
9. At the Norwegian cookie-making party, Jo describes herself as "nothing more than claws and salt." What is she feeling here and have you ever felt that way in a group setting? Where else does salt get a mention in this book?
10. To date, Hmong veterans of the CIA's "secret war" have never received any veterans benefits, other than a bill that was passed in 2021 for funeral benefits. How has the experience of Hmong refugees in Wisconsin and Minnesota touched your life?

11. *Brush* is a loose, modern retelling of the folktale of The Magic Paintbrush, which has been told in many cultures for centuries, and is recounted by Mai Lor at the end of this book. In *Brush*, who represents the poor young boy? Who is the cruel master? The white bird? What part is the "table overflowing with cakes and meat"? Who or what is the greedy king? Does *Brush* include a boat that is never to be seen again?
12. How did reading in large print change your experience? Why is large print an appropriate choice for this particular story?
13. Why do you think the author made a deliberate choice to not describe Jo's appearance? How did you imagine Jo?
14. What are all the meanings of the title *Brush*?
15. Many character names in this book are androgynous. Discuss ways the author repeatedly celebrates the masculine in women and the feminine in men. How does the Susan Sontag quote tie the two stories together and clarify the overarching theme?
16. Which twist was most surprising to you? As you look back, what foreshadowing do you notice?
17. Who is the drunk driver?
18. There is an ire for technology in this book, however by the end of the book the author and characters are embracing/celebrating some aspects. The tree planting app, the audio on the garden placards, and the technology accommodations to help Eileen. What parts of technology do you love or hate? What would you like to eliminate, and what hopes do you have for possible benevolent uses of AI, etc.?
19. Images of birds are woven throughout the book. What birds did you notice and what did they symbolize in the scenes?
20. Both characters struggle to break free from suffocating gender expectations. Do you think these societal lanes hurt men as much as women? Do you have examples from your own life? The character of Jared represents exaggerated toxic masculinity. As outrageous as he is, have you ever known a person like Jared? How do other men react to "Jareds"?
21. Do you feel Grant got a happy ending? Did Jo?