A Series of Catastrophes and Miracles
Reader Discussion Guide

1. Mary Elizabeth's late stage cancer prognosis was grim, and her treatment had at the time only slim odds of working. If you suddenly had to face your own mortality, how do you think you would react? What do you think you would change about your life right now?

2. In the book, Mary Elizabeth observes that "There is good in the sad stuff," and that grief is "Full of extraordinary luminous beauty too." Do you agree or disagree with her assessment? Have you ever found positive experiences within very difficult ones? Describe what it was like and how it changed your perception of them.

3. Throughout the narrative, Mary Elizabeth describes speaking openly with her daughters about her health. How do you think parents should talk to their children about serious situations? Have you ever had a crisis where you had to figure out how much or how little to share with your family? What did you do?

4. Mary Elizabeth and Debbie have different approaches to their illnesses. Mary Elizabeth is open, writing and talking about it and joining a support group, while Debbie prefers to keep her status more private and her experience more intimate. Which approach resonates with you? Why?

5. In Chapter 14, Mary Elizabeth talks about how her experience has rearranged many of her friendships. Have you ever been through something that shifted what you thought about the people you knew, either because they pulled away or because they stepped up? How do outside events reveal character?

6. In Chapter 14, Mary Elizabeth talks about her ideas of prayer and grace, musing about how she separates her faith from her belief in science. Do you agree with her—and do you think the two concepts can truly coexist?

7. At the beginning of the book, Mary Elizabeth and Jeff have reconciled after a painful marital separation. Do you believe in second chances? Have you ever faced a tough choice between trying again at something and letting go? What finally tipped the balance?

8. Mary Elizabeth struggles with what she calls her "sick person's head" while observing the dramatic physical changes that cancer also brings to Debbie, Dad, and Cassandra. How does exterior appearance affect your state of mind—and wellness? Have you ever had a time when your inner and outer self seemed at odds? How did you reconcile the two?

9. Mary Elizabeth and Debbie repeatedly joke with each other as a shorthand means of coping. What roles does humor play in your life? Are there any situations—as when Mike insists, “That’s not funny,” – when certain topics should be off limits?

10. Have you ever had a personal experience with cancer, either as a patient or with someone close to you? How did it change your understanding of disease and treatment? Has reading this book changed what you know about cancer? What surprised you?

11. Mary Elizabeth talks about the high cost of treatment and contrasts her own medical journey with that of Leo, who has to crowdfund his way through treatment. What do you think are the ethical responsibilities of drug companies, doctors, and researchers—and what can be done about the increasingly high costs of treatment?

12. Julie observes in Chapter 11 that “Everybody at some point, gets sick. Everybody has to go to the doctor.” How do you advocate for yourself when you’re in the role of the patient? What do you wish doctors understood better about the patient experience?

13. Mary Elizabeth says she staunchly rejects the word “battle” when it comes to cancer. She also grapples with words like “survivor” and “the cure.” How do you feel about the words we use to talk about cancer? How does language shape our perspective?