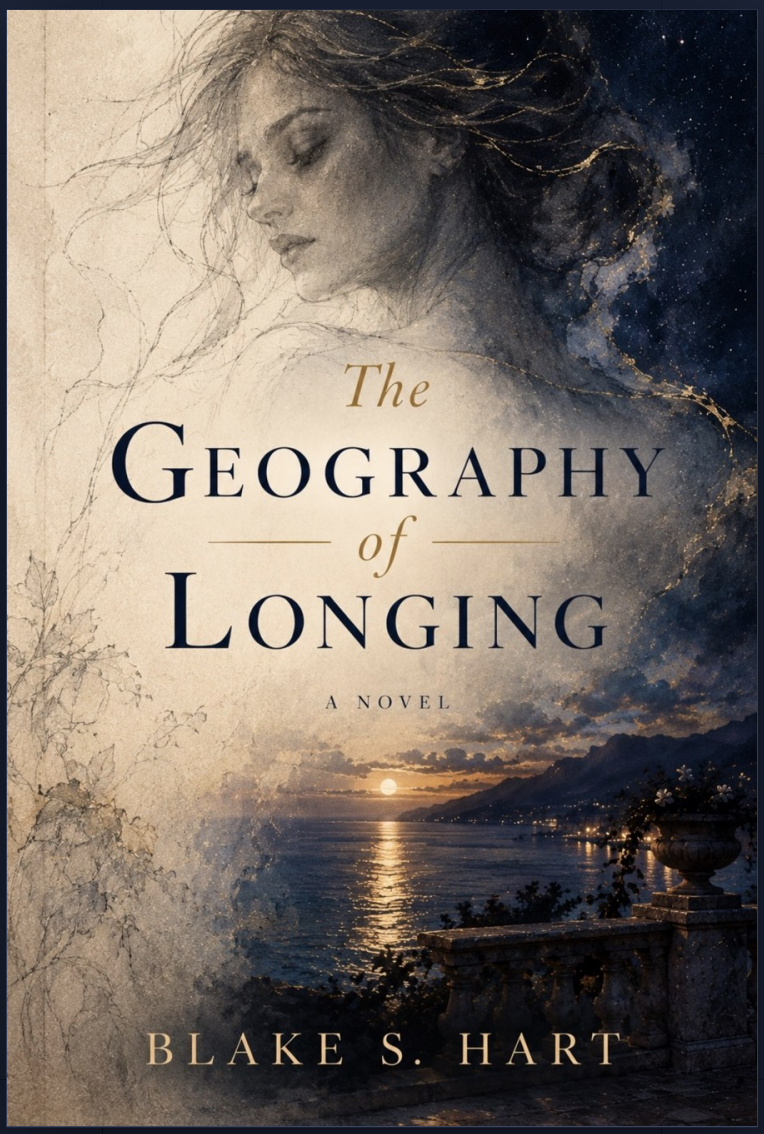
A BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE



Questions for reading together, chapter by chapter

FREE TO PRINT AND SHARE

A NOTE TO READERS

Thank you for reading together

Thank you for choosing *The Geography of Longing* for your book club. Some of the best conversations I have ever had began with a book on the table and a few friends willing to say what it stirred in them.

This is a novel about longing: the ache for a love we cannot yet see, the grief of losing what we hoped to keep, and the quiet courage it takes to go on living in the meantime. Julian learns, slowly and imperfectly, that the deepest hopes of the heart are not meant to pull us away from our lives, but to wake us up to them.

These questions follow the story chapter by chapter. Use the ones that open a door for your group, skip the ones that don't, and feel free to wander. If your conversation ends somewhere far from the book, it may have gone exactly where it needed to.

If your group would like me to join you, in person in Anchorage or by video anywhere, I would be glad to hear from you.

Blake S. Hart

ABOUT THE NOVEL

The Geography of Longing

Julian is thirty-two, a professor of Romantic literature with a nineteenth-century heart, a marriage behind him, and a life whose days have come to differ chiefly in their weather. Then one night he dreams of a woman standing on a terrace of black stone above a violet sea, and he wakes certain he has been looking for her all his life.

As the dreams return and his waking life grows poorer by comparison, Julian must discover what the dream was truly for: not an escape from the world, but a summons back into it.

How to use this guide

Each chapter includes a brief recap, a passage to read aloud, and five or six questions. The guide is divided into four parts for groups that meet over several weeks. Groups meeting once can use the whole-book questions at the end, adding favorites from any chapter.

I	The Dream	Chapters 1–4
II	The Convergence	Chapters 5–8
III	The Silence	Chapters 9–11
IV	The Waking	Chapters 12–14 and A Final Word

Questions in each part assume readers have finished those chapters. Part IV and the whole-book questions discuss the ending.

Bring the book to the table

- Serve strawberries, jasmine tea, or a cake that leans a little. Julian's brother Oliver would approve.
- Open with a round of "first person you wanted to tell" stories, inspired by Julian's father.
- Close by reading "When Dreams Awaken," the poem at the end of the novel, aloud.

PART I

The Dream

Chapters 1–4

CHAPTER ONE

The Inventory of an Empty Room

Julian is thirty-two, an associate professor of Romantic Literature and an archivist of forgotten manuscripts, living alone a year after his marriage to Claire ended. He tells his students that Romantic love is a beautiful fraud. That night he dreams of a woman standing on a terrace of black stone above a violet sea, and he wakes in tears.

> *"I think you're in love with the idea of a soul, but you're terrified of a person."*
>
> — CLAIRE

1. Julian suspects his heart belongs "to an age that had died before he was born." Have you ever felt out of step with your own time? What does Julian gain, and what does he lose, by living that way?
2. He calls Romantic love "one of the most successful frauds ever perpetrated upon the human imagination." Why might he need to believe this? Is any part of his argument true?
3. Claire tells him he is in love with the idea of a soul but terrified of a person. What is the difference? Where do you see that fear in the rest of the chapter?
4. Julian's father says he knew he loved Julian's mother when "she was the first person I wanted to tell." How does this plain definition of love compare with the poets Julian teaches?
5. The chapter ends with Julian writing a sentence he would have criticized in a student's essay, and for the first time, not crossing it out. What has begun to change in him?

CHAPTER TWO

The Ache of an Unfinished Dream

For thirteen nights the woman does not return. Julian lectures on Sehnsucht, finds a nineteenth-century love letter in the archives, and begins noticing small kindnesses in the city. On the fourteenth night he finds the terrace again.

> *"He had loved her most, the letter said, at the moment she forgot she was being observed."*
>
> — CHAPTER TWO

1. Julian describes Sehnsucht as feeling "homesick for a place we have never been." Is that feeling familiar to you? Where do you think it comes from?
2. "Hope is a dangerous thing to dismiss. It is also a dangerous thing to mistake for certainty." How do you live between those two dangers?
3. Why does the ordinary scene in the old love letter (a rainy afternoon, a cart stuck in the mud) move Julian so deeply?
4. Julian had seen his colleague Aris as everything he disliked about the modern age, until Aris showed real concern for him. What does that moment reveal about Julian's judgments of other people?
5. On the terrace, the woman says she wants to know "whether there's a man behind all those words." Why does that question unsettle him?

CHAPTER THREE

The Weight of Wonder

The woman leads Julian down a staircase toward the sea. She will not give her name, but she shares small, ordinary preferences, and he confesses what went wrong with Claire. Before he wakes, she asks him to go somewhere beautiful in his own world.

> *"The dream had not made the world smaller. He had done that on his own."*
>
> — CHAPTER THREE

1. The woman suggests Julian might "try allowing some questions to remain open." What is the value of leaving some questions unanswered, in love, in art, or in life?

2. She likes rain on a roof and being remembered for small things. Why does the ordinariness of her answers surprise Julian, and why does it matter?
3. Julian admits, "I stopped seeing her… I preferred the woman I remembered to the woman who was actually sitting across from me." Have you seen this happen in a relationship?
4. "Go somewhere beautiful. Somewhere in your own world." Why is this the first thing she asks of him? Where would you go?
5. Discuss the line quoted above. Who is responsible for how large or small our world feels?

CHAPTER FOUR

The Return of the Spark

Julian begins to notice the world again. He sets aside his lecture notes, finds the notebook of poems he wrote as a young man, including poems about his mother's illness and his father's grief, and writes his first new lines in years.

> *"Perhaps wonder does not make the world smaller by comparison. Perhaps it teaches us how much we have failed to see."*
>
> — JULIAN'S NOTEBOOK

1. Julian closes his prepared lecture on Keats and apologizes to his students. What is he really apologizing for?
2. His younger self wrote, "I intend to spend my life making something beautiful." Why did Julian stop writing? What made it possible to start again?
3. The old poems reveal his mother's death and his father's withdrawal into grief. How does that childhood loss help explain the man we met in Chapter One?
4. Julian insists, "It was not love. Not yet," because love requires knowledge, and knowledge requires time. Do you agree?
5. Is wonder an escape from ordinary life, or a way of seeing it more clearly? Can it be both?

PART II

The Convergence

Chapters 5–8

CHAPTER FIVE

The First Light

Julian meets Claire to sign the last papers on their old house. His sister Eleanor names a pattern in his life he had never seen, and his friend David questions what the dream is giving him. That night, Julian finishes his first poem in nearly a decade.

> *"A dream might feel safer because it can't ask you to live with the awkward parts."*
>
> — DAVID

1. Julian wonders whether there is "such a thing as neutral ground between two people who had loved each other." How did the meeting with Claire change your view of either of them?
2. Eleanor tells him, "You can be our brother." Julian realizes that being needed may have become "the safest way he knew to be loved." What is the difference between being needed and being loved?
3. Is David right that a dream is safer than a real relationship? Why might Julian resist this idea?
4. David says feelings "can be true without telling us everything we need to know." How might that apply to your own life?
5. Julian puts a question mark beside a stanza that seems "too wise for a man who still hoped to return to a dream each night." Has something you wrote or said ever known more than you did?

CHAPTER SIX

The Risk of Renewal

Julian proposes a new seminar and is offered a modest evening reading group instead. On the terrace he speaks about his mother, his father, and his siblings, and the woman gives him a warning he does not yet understand.

> *"Don't mistake where you found me for where you must live."*
>
> — THE WOMAN ON THE TERRACE

1. Miss Evans says, "You can understand something and still be moved by it." How do understanding and wonder relate in your own reading?
2. Manning tells Julian that "renewal is not the same as acceleration." Why is Julian disappointed by such a fair offer? Where in your life do you want acceleration?
3. Julian expects the woman to take his side against the university, but she asks about the reading group instead. What does this tell you about who she is?
4. What do you think she means by the warning quoted above? Why might she say it now?
5. The chapter ends with Julian "shamefully" wondering how soon he can sleep again. Is his longing beginning to become a problem?

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Great Convergence

On a quiet night beside the violet sea, Julian and the woman kiss for the first time. She admits she is afraid, the stars begin to vanish from the water, and she asks him to keep living in his waking world, whatever happens.

> *"Whatever happens here, don't stop living there."*
>
> — THE WOMAN ON THE TERRACE

1. The first kiss is gentle rather than dramatic, as if both were learning "whether a thing long imagined could bear the weight of being real." Why do you think the author chose restraint here?
2. Julian remembers her stubborn strand of hair and the uneven lift of her eyebrow. Why do small, imperfect details carry so much weight in this love story?

3. What might she be afraid of? What did the disappearing stars suggest to you?
4. Julian once thought finding someone meant the end of searching. Now he suspects it "might be the beginning of another kind." What does he mean?
5. Julian calls his brother Oliver and manages not to give advice. How is his relationship with his siblings changing alongside his love for the woman?

CHAPTER EIGHT

The First Disappearance

Sunday dinner with Eleanor and Oliver centers on a cake that refuses to stand up straight. Julian tells the woman about it on the terrace, and she says she would like an impossible family. Then the dreams stop.

> *"He had been so afraid of losing her that he had forgotten to ask whether he had ever been promised another night."*
>
> — CHAPTER EIGHT

1. The leaning cake is a comic image of imperfection. What role does humor play in this novel?
2. "I think I would like an impossible family." Then: "Perhaps one day… I don't know why I said that." What did this exchange make you suspect, or hope?
3. Julian wakes feeling that the world contains "people who expected him to arrive." How has his relationship to mornings changed since Chapter One?
4. Julian tries to bargain with the night, though he knows love is not a transaction. Have you ever bargained this way, with fate, or with yourself?
5. What does the quotation above reveal about how we treat the gifts we have been given?

PART III

The Silence

Chapters 9–11

CHAPTER NINE

The Violence of Longing

The terrace does not return. Julian grieves a loss no one else can see, confides in David, and hears the woman's laughter in a fragment of a dream. Only when he stops bargaining does a voice call his name.

> *"He had only begun treating its love as insufficient because it could not give him the one thing he wanted."*
>
> — CHAPTER NINE

1. Why might the author call longing "violent"? Whom does it harm in this chapter?
2. David says he would grieve, but hopes he would not decide "that every person who remained had become less real because one person was gone." How do David and Eleanor each show up for Julian?
3. Julian says of the woman: she laughs at him, listens properly, and notices when he turns a feeling into an argument. What does his list reveal about what he had been missing?
4. Where in our own lives do we treat the love we have as insufficient because it cannot give us one particular thing?
5. The voice returns only after Julian is "too tired for bargains." What is the relationship between surrender and receiving?

CHAPTER TEN

The Last Night of the Violet Sea

Julian and the woman are reunited as the terrace begins to fade. She tells him she does not want a perfect place, only a life where she can be imperfect and still be wanted. They say goodbye, and Julian wakes to a world that goes on without her.

> *"Not a perfect place. A place where I can be imperfect and still be wanted."*
>
> — THE WOMAN ON THE TERRACE

1. She does not want the best chair; she wants to know whether he would be kind when she was tired and cross. What does this conversation say about what love actually asks of us?
2. Julian realizes he "had often wanted the evidence of love without accepting its demands." How does this realization reframe his marriage to Claire?
3. His mother once wrote, "You don't have to be brave every minute." Why does this note return here? What permission does it give?
4. The two of them return to the railing where Julian first saw her. Why might the author bring the story full circle at this moment?
5. Julian finds it cruel that the world simply went on without her. Could the world's persistence also be a mercy?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Silence After Heaven

Julian keeps his promise to live, one ordinary task at a time. He loses the memory of her voice, visits his father and hears new stories about his mother, and begins writing about the waking world.

> *"He knew only that he had loved, and that he was still here."*
>
> — CHAPTER ELEVEN

1. "He had promised her that he would live… Here it meant remembering to eat breakfast." How does the novel portray the unglamorous, practical work of grief?
2. Miss Evans asks whether imagination helps us survive disappointment or makes it worse. What do you think?

3. Julian can no longer recall the exact sound of the woman's voice. Why does losing this detail hurt so much? How do we keep hold of those we have lost?

4. Julian asks his father, "What was she like before us?" How does that conversation change both men? Why can Julian ask it now?

5. Julian once believed love was proved by the pain of its absence. Now he wonders whether it might also be proved "by the courage to remain." Discuss.

PART IV

The Waking

Chapters 12–14 and A Final Word

CONTAINS THE ENDING. DISCUSS AFTER FINISHING THE NOVEL.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Poverty of Ordinary Things

By February, Julian is doing well by every outward measure. He asks a colleague, Amelia, to dinner, and she gently names what he cannot hide. He goes home afraid that the dream has ruined him for reality.

> *"Then I suspect you've brought someone else to dinner with us."*
>
> — AMELIA

1. Julian discovers that grief can become "respectable" and learn manners. Does that ring true? Is recovering the same as healing?
2. Eleanor tells him, "Not every encounter has to become a life." Is that good advice? Why does Julian need to hear it?
3. Amelia is kind, honest, and gracious. Was it fair of Julian to ask her to dinner? Was she right to say what she said?
4. Julian fears "a long corridor of perfectly adequate rooms." Why is this quieter fear worse than his earlier grief? What is the difference between settling and contentment?
5. In Chapter Two, Julian wondered whether the dream revealed the poverty of his life or the poverty of the way he looked at it. Where does he stand now? Where do you?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Woman at the Table

After months of refusing, Julian agrees to dinner with David, his wife Rebecca, and Rebecca's friend Marie, an elementary school teacher and mother of a young daughter, Charlie. Something in Marie feels impossibly familiar.

> *"The miraculous did not always announce itself with thunder. Sometimes it asked for another spoon."*
>
> — CHAPTER THIRTEEN

1. Julian very nearly stayed home. Have you ever almost missed something important because you nearly chose not to go?
2. Marie's kindness shows in her love for children who spill paint and tell inconvenient truths. How does she resemble the woman on the terrace, and how is she different?
3. Discuss the line quoted above. Where have you encountered the miraculous in an ordinary form?
4. Julian keeps his hands in his pockets, afraid of reaching for her "from a memory she did not share." How should he carry the dream into a real relationship? Should he ever tell her?
5. Marie comes with a daughter, a babysitter, and a full life. How does this answer the woman on the terrace's wish to be loved in an imperfect, ordinary life?
6. The chapter ends: "He had just met the woman of his dreams." Did you read that line literally, figuratively, or both?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Dream Stepped into Reality

Julian and Marie begin to know each other through texts, dinners, and stories about Charlie. A kiss leads to two quiet words, and Julian weeps in his car, not from grief but from joy.

> *"There you are." "Here I am."*
>
> — MARIE AND JULIAN

1. Julian wants to learn "the habits that no dream could supply." Compare his first kiss on the terrace with his kiss with Marie. What has changed in him?

2. What do you think Marie meant by "There you are"? Why is Julian grateful not to know?
3. The novel never explains how the dream and Marie are connected. Did you want an explanation? How did that choice affect your reading?
4. Marie says children can forgive our imperfections "provided you're willing to admit it." How does this line sum up the novel's view of love?
5. The story ends not at a wedding but on an ordinary road, "waiting to be traveled." Why do you think the author ended it there?

AFTERWORD

A Final Word & "When Dreams Awaken"

The author steps forward to speak directly to the reader, then closes with a poem.

1. The author writes that this "was never meant to be a story about a man who discovered that dreams were better than reality." Did "A Final Word" change how you understood the novel?
2. "You may grieve what is absent and still cherish what remains." Where is that true in your own life?
3. "Do not make a prison of the dream by refusing the world outside it." Which dreams risk becoming prisons, and how do we keep them from it?
4. Read the closing poem, "When Dreams Awaken," aloud. Which line stays with you?

FOR THE WHOLE BOOK

Looking Back

For a single meeting, or to close your final session

CONTAINS THE ENDING.

1. The novel opens with Paul Valéry: "The best way to make your dreams come true is to wake up." How does this epigraph frame the whole story?
2. Consider the title. What is the "geography" of longing? Map the places of the novel: the terrace, Julian's apartment, the archives, the gardens, Eleanor's table. What does each place mean?
3. Who, or what, was the woman on the terrace? A memory, a premonition, a gift, or Julian's own imagination? Does it matter?
4. Where did you sense hope at work in the novel, even in Julian's darkest chapters?
5. Julian is a scholar of Keats, Shelley, and Austen. How does his profession shape the way he understands, and misunderstands, his own life?
6. Follow Milton, the plant on Julian's windowsill, through the book. What does it come to represent?
7. Which supporting character mattered most to you: David, Eleanor, Oliver, Claire, Miss Evans, Manning, Amelia, or Marie? Why?
8. How does the loss of Julian's mother shape the way he loves as an adult?
9. Has this novel changed how you think about your own longings?
10. If you could ask the author one question, what would it be?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Blake S. Hart is a historian, educator, executive leader, Army chaplain, and published scholar. He holds a Ph.D. in History; his dissertation is titled *Catalysts for Change: The Sacralizing Impact of the Second Great Awakening*. He writes from Anchorage, Alaska, where literature, philosophy, and history meet.

The Geography of Longing is his first novel.

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Your dream might become reality."

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