Bittersweet Book Club Kit

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Bittersweet
How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole

Susan Cain

#1 New York Times Bestselling Author of Quiet
DEAR READER,

After a five-year labor of love—and ten years of overwhelming feedback from readers of Quiet—I’m thrilled to share my new book, Bittersweet: How Sorrow and Longing Make Us Whole. This book, in a nutshell, is my answer to the question: What are the powers of a bittersweet, melancholic outlook—and why have we been so blind to its value?

I’ve perceived these powers since I was very young, though it took me decades to name and understand them. Bittersweetness, as I see it, is a tendency to sorrow and longing; an acute awareness of passing time; and a piercing joy at the beauty of the world. It recognizes that light and dark, birth and death—bitter and sweet—are forever paired. And it’s the key to a full and satisfying life. If we realize that all humans know—or will know—sorrow and loss, as well as joy, we can transform personal and collective pain into creativity, spirituality, and love.

I hope this guide enhances your reading of the book, whether you’re reading on your own or in a group with others. I’ve included some additional materials here, including my Top-40 Bittersweet Playlist, discussion questions, writing prompts, and more. And if you’d like something sweet, why not enjoy some bittersweet chocolate, sip some tea, or enjoy a glass of your favorite drink while you read. I’d love to hear your thoughts, including any songs you may add to the Playlist.

Warmest,

Susan Cain

#Bittersweet

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think of the Bittersweet idea that “light and dark, birth and death—bitter and sweet”—are forever paired? Does this describe your life experiences? What areas of your life do you now see through a “bittersweet” lens?

2. How did you score on the “Bittersweet Quiz”? Do you tear up easily at touching TV commercials? Do you react intensely to music, art, or nature? Have others described you as an “old soul”?

3. “People play the happy songs on their playlists about 175 times on average, but they play the sad songs almost 800 times,” writes Susan Cain: “They tell researchers that they associate sad music with profound beauty, deep connection, transcendence, nostalgia, and common humanity.” Can you relate to this? What songs do you enjoy listening to? Which are your favorites and why?

4. “Longing is momentum in disguise,” Susan Cain says, “it’s active, not passive; touched with the creative, the tender, and the divine. We long for something, or someone. We reach for it; we move toward it.” What has longing meant to you? What are you longing for: your unique imprint, singular mission, wordless calling?

5. “Connecting with what matters and taking committed action—moves us from bitter to sweet, from loss to love.” Everyone experiences loss. It is part of the human condition. How have you moved “from bitter to sweet, from loss to love”? Are there coping strategies you recommend?

6. Bittersweet can be read as an antidote to a culture of “toxic positivity.” Do you think this term accurately describes our culture? And, if so, how does a bittersweet lens help to counter the pressure to always act positive, no matter what?

7. Who are the artists, musicians, athletes, entrepreneurs, scientists, or spiritual leaders you love, and why do you love them? Do you notice any bittersweet qualities they may possess? What do they represent to you?

8. “An intense awareness of passing time [is] the hallmark of bittersweetness.” This awareness happens during birthdays and anniversaries, graduation ceremonies and weddings—even while looking at old photos. Describe moments when you have experienced “an intense awareness of passing time.”

9. Society often tells us to wear a brave and happy face. But Susan Cain notes: “If we could honor sadness a little more, maybe we could see it . . . as the bridge we need to connect with others.” How have you reacted when you see a stranger crying or a loved one struggling? Why do you think we disguise our sadness or hide our tears?

10. “No matter how distasteful we might find someone’s opinions,” writes Susan Cain, “no matter how radiant or fierce they may appear, they have suffered, or they will.” During these especially fraught times of intense polarization, how can this frame of mind help us heal?
11. The “wounded healer,” a term coined by the psychologist Carl Jung in 1951, is one of humanity’s oldest archetypes. Many people respond to loss by healing in others the wounds which they themselves have suffered. “In Greek myth, the centaur Chiron was injured by a poisoned arrow that gave him terrible pain, but also curative powers. In shamanistic cultures, healers must first undergo an initiation process involving great misery. In Judaism, the Messiah’s powers derive from his own suffering; he surrounds himself with the poor and the sick because he’s one of them. In modern times, wounded healers take more recognizable forms. The bereaved mother of a teen girl dead on the highway founds Mothers Against Drunk Driving. A nine-year old whose father dies of brain cancer grows up to be a grief counselor.” What are some other examples of “wounded healers” today?

12. Our cultural rituals—Fourth of July, New Year’s Eve, Happy Birthday to You—celebrate birth, rather than help us live with impermanence and sorrow. . . . Historically, we see U.S. as the land of abundant resources, the frontier of limitless self-invention, while ignoring the dark parts of the American story. How has the “tyranny of positivity” affected your life? Have you ever felt like “the master of OK”? What do you think this does to us?

13. If you were to write a letter to your younger self, what would you say?

14. Do you remember your first love, or the one who got away? Describe the feeling. How does that enter into your thoughts on relationships and commitment today?

15. How should we live, knowing that we and everyone we love will die? In her book, Susan Cain explores different answers to the experience of grief: Realizing that we’re more resilient to grief than we thought. Learning to let go. And connecting to others through the shared experience of grief. Which of these approaches resonates for you?

16. Portuguese author Valter Hugo Mãe wrote: “It’s urgent to live enchanted.” What does this phrase mean to you? How does it relate to bittersweetness?

17. In Bittersweet, Susan Cain talks about “effortless perfection,” the seemingly easy lives of university students. What other examples of effortless perfection can you pinpoint in our culture, and how might they be changed?

18. Susan Cain shares, “Whatever pain you can’t get rid of, make it your creative offering.” After reading Bittersweet, are you now considering your own creative offering? How has your outlook on pain and longing adapted through the reading of this book?
WRITING PROMPT #1
Write about a bittersweet moment or experience in your life.

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________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

WRITING PROMPT #2
Write down an “I am” statement about yourself, something based on a memory or a self-conception that’s holding you back. Then ask yourself: Would the people who love you still love you if they knew what you just wrote? Would you still love you? Hopefully, the answer to these questions is yes. But if you’re not sure, or if the answer, for now, is no, remember the advice that Susan Cain shared in her book from her friend, the psychologist Susan David: You’re not saying there’s something wrong with you. You’re not saying that you have a pathology. You’re saying that you’re human.

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WRITING PROMPT #3
Write about a “pain you can’t get rid of.” Is there a way to transform this pain into beauty? (when finished) How did writing about it make you feel?

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________________________________________________________________________
1. Follow your longing where it's telling you to go.

2. Transform your pain into beauty, your longing into belonging.

3. The art we love best, the music we love most, express our yearning for a perfect and beautiful world.

4. Upbeat tunes make us dance around our kitchens and invite friends for dinner. But sad music makes us want to touch the sky.

5. Whatever pain you can't get rid of, make it your creative offering.

6. Creativity has the power to look pain in the eye and turn it into something else.

7. Our oldest problem is the pain of separation, our deepest dream is the desire for reunion.

8. You don’t have to believe in the deities of the ancient books to be transformed by spiritual longing.

9. We transcend grief only when we realize how connected we are with all the other humans who struggle to transcend theirs.

10. We're just humans: flawed and beautiful and longing for love.
# Bittersweet Playlist

1. **Bittersweet Symphony** – The Verve  
2. **My Sweet Lord** – George Harrison  
3. **She’s Leaving Home** – The Beatles  
4. **7 Seconds** – Neneh Cherry and Youssou N’Dour  
5. **Hinach Yafah** – The Idan Raichel Project  
6. **Landslide** – Fleetwood Mac  
7. **Hallelujah** – Leonard Cohen  
8. **Over and Over** – Morcheeba  
9. **Suzanne** – Leonard Cohen  
10. **Soul Meets Body** – Death Cab for Cutie  
11. **7 Years** – Lukas Graham  
12. **Sinnerman** – Nina Simone  
13. **Ao Longe O Mar** – Madredeus  
14. **After All** – Dar Williams  
15. **Ne Me Quitte Pas** – Jacques Brel  
16. **Mon Amour** – Idan Raichel Project and Vieux Farka Touré  
17. **Cats in the Cradle** – Harry Chapin  
18. **Father and Son** – Cat Stevens  
19. **Vienna** – Billy Joel  
20. **The Boxer** – Simon and Garfunkel  
21. **Dreams** – Infinity Song (cover of Fleetwood Mac)  
22. **Albinoni’s Adagio in G Minor** – performed by Stjepan Hauser  
23. **Ode to Joy** – Beethoven’s 9th, Movement IV  
24. **Satisfied** – Hamilton  
25. **Wish You Were Here** – Pink Floyd  
26. **Someone Like You** – Adele  
27. **Ti Jom Poca** – Leonel Almeida  
28. **In the Waiting Line** – Zero 7  
29. **One** – U2  
30. **Video Games** – Lana Del Rey  
31. **Condolence** – Benjamin Clementine  
32. **I Feel Love** – Barbara Eramo  
33. **Rocket Man** – Elton John  
34. **Diamonds and Rust** – Joan Baez  
35. **Everybody Hurts** – REM  
36. **Otherside** – Red Hot Chili Peppers  
37. **Cigarettes and Chocolate Milk** – Rufus Wainwright  
38. **Le Temps Qui Passe** – Stephan Moccio  
39. **Desert Rose** – Sting  
40. **Space Oddity** – David Bowie

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**What songs would you add to make your own Bittersweet playlist?**

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