

## Group Reading Guide

***The Sunflower***  
**Richard Paul Evans**

### Discussion Questions

1. Sunflowers appear throughout the story, from the name of the orphanage (El Girasol) to Christine's wedding decorations to symbols found in the ancient Temple of the Sun in Machu Picchu. What does the image of the sunflower represent? What does it mean to Christine in particular?
2. When Martin tells Christine he no longer wants to get married, she asks him what she did wrong. Why is Christine so quick to blame herself? What did she see in Martin, a man she dated for six years and almost married? How is Paul, to whom Christine is immediately attracted from their first encounter outside the hotel in Cuzco, most different from Martin?
3. Christine and Jessica are "proof that opposites attract . . . and both women, in their own ways, envied the other" (35). How would you describe each woman? What do Jessica and Christine each bring to -- and get out of -- their friendship?
4. After Martin calls off the wedding, Jessica says to Christine, "He'll come to his senses eventually. . . . The only question is whether you'll be dumb enough to take him when he comes crawling back" (46). Yet later in the story Jessica tells Paul that Martin is Christine's "happy ending" (302). Does Jessica really mean what she tells Paul, or is she trying to prevent Christine from making what she believes is a mistake? Does Jessica have a more selfish motive for not wanting Christine to marry Paul?
5. Paul successfully weathered the simultaneous lawsuits brought against him by the families of two patients who died in the ER under his care. Why then did he give up his career as a doctor and leave the United States to travel around South America? What draws him to El Girasol and then compels him to stay on as director of the orphanage?
6. How does the three-day period Christine and Paul spend together at the orphanage lay the foundation for their relationship? When Christine leaves the orphanage with the tour group, she writes the following in a note to Paul: "You helped me in ways you will probably never know" (155). Describe the ways in which Paul helped her and how these were significant to Christine's development.
7. Why does Paul share the story of his mother, who is dying from ALS, with Christine? When Christine returns to the orphanage at the end of the story, why does she repeat to Paul the phrase ("Love is stronger than pain") that he used when telling her about his parents? How does this sentiment apply to their situation?
8. When Christine becomes sick with dengue fever, she's in a remote area of Peru with only Paul to care for her. How is this incident a turning point for Christine both personally and in terms of her relationship with Paul? What does Paul come to realize about himself and his feelings for Christine as he sees her through this illness?
9. Describe Christine's transformation from the beginning of the story to the end. In what significant ways does she change? When Christine and Paul leave Makisapa Lodge after she recovers from her illness, the walk through the jungle no longer frightens her. "She knew she was not the same woman who had marched into the jungle the week before" (283). Why is Christine not afraid this time?
10. On their last night together in Peru, Paul asks Christine to marry him. What prompts him to propose -- and Christine to accept -- after knowing each other for such a short time? What is Christine's response when she learns that Martin is waiting for her in Lima? During her reunion with Martin, what does Christine conclude about her former fiancé? Why does she return to the United States with Martin?
11. In the Epilogue, the narrator who began the story reveals that Paul and Christine have married and settled in a Dayton suburb with Pablo and Roxana. What was your reaction to finding out that Paul chose not to continue running the orphanage? What purpose does the narrator serve?
12. When Paul learns that he is to see Christine again as a result of Jim's accident, he writes in his diary, "Fate has a way of cutting corners" (195). Do you believe in fate?

- What role, if any, does it play in this story? If not for Jim's accident, do you think they would have seen each other again? If so, which character do you think would have been more likely to take the initiative?
13. What is the central theme of *The Sunflower*? What aspects of the book did you find especially memorable or inspiring? Discuss the humanitarian mission in *The Sunflower*. What were the success and failures? What did you learn?

### Enhance Your Book Club

1. If you're hosting the discussion, incorporate a sunflower theme into the meeting. Brighten up the room with a bouquet of sunflowers. Serve a sunflower-inspired recipe from the National Sunflower Association ([www.sunflowernsa.com](http://www.sunflowernsa.com)), such as Artichoke Sunflower Dip, Acorn Squash with Caramelized Sunflower Kernels, or Spinach & Sunflower Salad with Orange Vinaigrette. End on a sweet note by giving each member a foil-wrapped chocolate sunflower medallion, which can be purchased at [www.keepsakefavors.com](http://www.keepsakefavors.com).
2. Take your book club on the road for a volunteer mission -- an outing in your town, a weekend trip, or even a journey to a foreign locale as Christine and Jessica undertake in *The Sunflower*. Find out more about humanitarian vacations at the following websites:

[http://www.globalvolunteers.org/1main/volunteer\\_vacation.htm](http://www.globalvolunteers.org/1main/volunteer_vacation.htm)

<http://www.globeaware.org/>

<http://www.i-to->

[i.com/Home.aspx?tabindex=0&tabid=76&subtabindex=0&subtabid=453&ci=en-gb](http://www.i.com/Home.aspx?tabindex=0&tabid=76&subtabindex=0&subtabid=453&ci=en-gb)

<http://www.justgive.org/html/ways/vacations.html>

<http://www.tjourneys.com/our%20company.htm>

Be sure to keep a scrapbook of your group's experiences!

3. Research the Peruvian locations featured in the book -- Machu Picchu, Cuzco, Lima, Ollantaytambo, and the jungle of the Amazon -- and discuss how the setting enhances the story. Visit [www.richardpaulevans.com](http://www.richardpaulevans.com) for photographs and video commentary from the author about his adventures in Peru.