

Lay it on my Heart

ANGELA
PNEUMAN



Discussion Questions & Wine Pairings

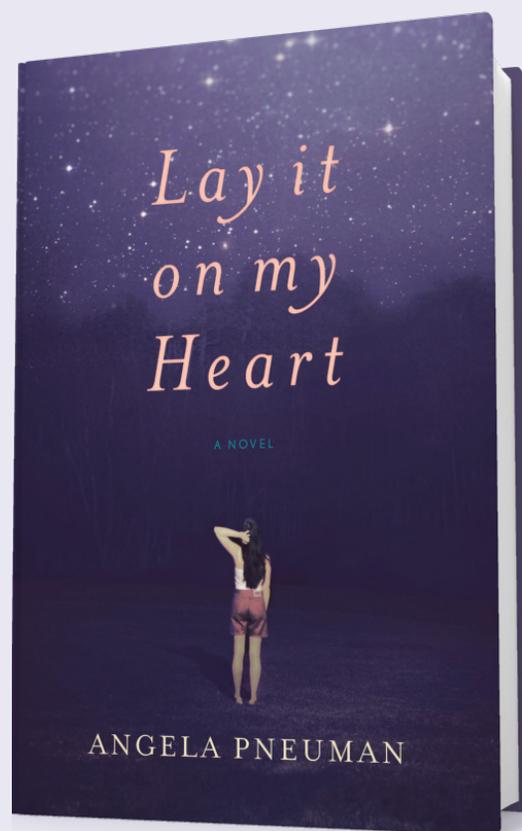
FROM THE AUTHOR:

I'm so happy to share *Lay It on My Heart* with you. It's a book that hits close to home, informed by my experience growing up in a small, rural, religious community in Kentucky. Sometimes when you write in the first person, readers want to know if the events in the book are true. Only "Did this happen?" is usually not the best way to find the writer's connection to the story. The answer is usually *no*, as it is here. But ask if the priorities of the book are important to the writer, and the answer is usually a sure-hearted *yes*. The closeness of the mother-daughter bond; female friendships; the behavior of boys and girls, men and women, around sex in a restrictive environment; sincere intentions and their painful results; the phenomenon of "coming of age," which, if we're lucky, happens not once but over and over—all are important to me. And the reason these things are important to me are deeply rooted in the facts of my own life.

Ultimately, I'm most curious about our bonds with each other, and how those bonds are reinforced or weakened by the stories we inherit or create to account for what we can't understand or know—stories about God, about our family, about ourselves. In trying to make sense of it all, I found myself adding another story of my own.

ABOUT THE BOOK:

This piercing, sly debut novel tells the story of one unforgettable month in a Kentucky girl's thirteenth year. Charmaine Peake's prophet father has been committed to a psychiatric institution. Her mother, forced to rent out their house and move them down to a trailer on the river, won't stop telling Charmaine things she doesn't want to hear—from marital details and middle-aged doubts to uncomfortable preoccupations with Charmaine's changing body. A sanctimonious missionary kid has taken over her real bedroom, where Charmaine discovers his stash of strange and questionable photos. She is being tested at every turn: Where will her choices take her? And her faith? She tries to pray ceaselessly as her father taught, but with so much upheaval, even God seems to have changed.



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Like the beloved *Ya-Ya Sisterhood*, *Lay It on My Heart* unleashes Southern humor on the effects of a parent's mental illness. It brings us into the heart of a family weathering the toughest patch in their lives. But most of all, it marks out the seemingly unbearable realities of adolescence and the power that comes from discovering—and accepting—who you are. A moving, hilarious portrayal of the relationship between mothers and daughters, this book fulfills Angela Pneuman's promise as "one of the most astonishingly talented writers today" (Julie Orringer).

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Charmaine thinks she's "beginning to wonder if all information can be sorted into what I wish I knew and what I wish I didn't." (p. 4) What kinds of information is she referring to? To which list do you think each bit belongs? By the end of the novel, do you think any of this information switches categories?
2. Adolescence is a "time of transition," as several characters note throughout the novel. Identify some of the things or ways of being that Charmaine is transitioning from and to. Who else is experiencing a time of transition in *Lay It on My Heart* and what are they transitioning between?
3. The Peake family has a reputation for being particularly devout and maybe even chosen by God, ever since ancestor Custer Peake led the Great Revival of 1973 in East Winder. When you first meet Phoebe, do you think her behavior contradicts her supposed faith—in her husband, or in God? Why or why not?
4. As a "born-again" Christian raised in an extremely religious community, Charmaine's struggles with her faith naturally run through all the struggles of her life. In what ways does Charmaine's religious instruction cause her pain? In what ways does it help her discover things about herself and the world around her?
5. On page 36, David says to Charmaine, "At least your mother acknowledges what she feels even as she allows it to come in between her and the Lord's work. At least she is not hiding her own thoughts from herself." Compare and contrast Charmaine's and Phoebe's responses to David and his faith, then his illness; how are these two women alike, and how are they different, in other ways?
6. The Peake women—Charmaine, Phoebe, and Daze—have each tried hard in their own ways to earn David's love and attention. What does it mean for them to be told that he is not a prophet after all, that much (if not all) of who they thought he was actually stemmed from symptoms of his manic depression?
7. Compare Charmaine's desire to be important to her father (which she considers an expression of her fallen nature) and Phoebe's desire that she be important to Charmaine. What about this family's dynamics have led them to the point at which we meet them in *Lay it on my Heart*? Do you imagine the relationship between Charmaine and Phoebe being very different if their central crises were, say, that David had a stroke? If their family were not devout Christians? Use examples from the novel to illustrate your opinion.
8. Pastor Chick assigns the youth group to pray for God to "lay three people on our heart." (p.124) What does this mean? Discuss the significance of the novel's title and its relevance to this moment.



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9. What did you think Seth meant when he told Charmaine that his gruesome photographs “help you stop thinking things”? (p. 190) Discuss the relationship happening between Seth and Dr. Osborne almost behind the scenes of the novel. Do you think it’s appropriate that Dr. Osborne gave these photos to Seth? Why or why not? What do you make of Dr. Osborne’s role in this story and in the lives of these characters?
10. What do you think is behind Charmaine’s fascination with Cecil Goode? Is it just that God laid him on her heart? Or do you think there’s something else going on? Describe what happens when she follows him home on page 242—what do you think she really wants from him? Does she get it? Why or why not?
11. Throughout the novel, Charmaine draws several connections between her experiences and what she knows about black holes in space. Why do you think they hold such fascination for her? Identify some other ways that science emerges in the story as a theme or to support a metaphor. Why do you think the author chose to use so many scientific references in a story about an intensely religious family?
12. David and Phoebe each attempt to give their daughter a lesson through the dissection of words. In particular, the words *apart* and *cleave*, respectively. Discuss the multiple meanings of these words in the context of the story. What do they come to mean to Charmaine in the end?
13. This novel thoughtfully explores the line between religiosity and insanity and raises interesting questions about those things we believe in but cannot prove or, sometimes, even sense. Discuss the beliefs of these characters and how their faith leads them to act or make decisions. Where, exactly, do you think that line may exist . . . or doesn’t it? How can one tell?
14. The final pages of the novel fast-forward a bit before coming back to the moment of Charmaine and Tracy on the water tower. Discuss this portion of the novel and what it reveals about the characters’ futures. What do you think about the very ending and Charmaine’s final thoughts on faith?



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Wine Guide

FROM THE AUTHOR:

Every writer I know has a day job to support the habit, and I'm lucky enough to write about wine. Not bad for a girl from a dry Kentucky town, right? I moved to Northern California in 1998, answered an ad in the paper, and ended up working for the legendary Robert Mondavi. Back labels, websites, tasting guides, wine pairings—if it has to do with wine, I write it. Along the way, I fell in love with the stuff.

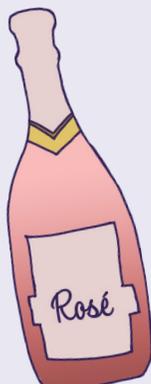
SOME OF MY FAVORITES:

I'm a huge fan of Sauvignon Blanc, a white wine with aromas and flavors that run the gamut from clean and flinty to ripe tropical fruit. Great all year round, but especially refreshing in the summer. If you're reading *Lay It on My Heart* for your book club, I can recommend Sauvignon Blanc from Turnbull Vineyards, Provenance Vineyards, or, for a bargain, Joel Gott—all guaranteed to taste delicious with cheese plates, mini-quiches, potato chips, etc.



As a dinner guest, I usually bring a lighter red wine, like Pinot Noir. It's a crowd pleaser—yummy red and black fruit with a hint of spice. I like to bring a copy of a well-loved book, too, like Tobias Wolff's *Old School*, or Julie Otsuka's *Buddha in the Attic*. Pinot Noir tastes best when it comes from cooler climates, like Carneros or Russian River Valley in California, or Willamette Valley in Oregon.

When I'm grilling out (or reading something gritty, like anything by Cormac McCarthy), I usually go to Zinfandel (the red kind) from Sonoma County in California. It's hearty and rustic, and it tastes great with anything you can make in the great outdoors: burgers, hotdogs, even pizza.



And when I'm at home, curled up with a book and my two cats? I'm a recent convert to dry rosé. It comes in a million different shades of pink and has enchanting hints of fruit with a backbone of cool steel. Sometimes it's made to sparkle, like the ones from Domaine Chandon. My favorite rosés come from wine varieties like Pinot Noir or a combination of Syrah, Grenache, and Mourvedre. I enjoy them while reading everything from Lorrie Moore to Ross MacDonald.