

Reading Guide

# DISPLACED

A Memoir

Jocelyn Kerr

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## About the Book

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In August 2005, Hurricane Katrina tore through New Orleans, upending lives and erasing neighborhoods in a matter of hours. In *Displaced*, Jocelyn Kerr delivers an unflinching account of what it means to lose a city, and the life you built within it, overnight.

From the chaotic days of evacuation to the surreal reality of starting over, Kerr traces the physical and emotional journey of survival, grief, and rebuilding. Along the way, moments of unexpected kindness and unlikely friendships emerge, illuminating the resilience of the human spirit.

More than a story of one storm, *Displaced* is a personal exploration of what it means to create a home and the ways disaster reshapes us. It's a historical snapshot, a testament to endurance, and speaks to anyone who has ever been forced to begin again.

## A Note from the Author

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This book started as a series of essays between 2007 and 2011. It began as part of my therapy and continued through a nonfiction MFA program where it served as my thesis. For nearly 20 years, I wasn't sure I had the emotional distance to share it with a wider audience. But as each anniversary passed, and more global disasters occurred, I realized sharing my story might help others find language for their own experiences of displacement and grief.

I hope *Displaced* sparks honest, generous conversation in your group. Not just about Hurricane Katrina, but about the things any of us cling to when the ground beneath us shifts. The questions in this guide are meant to open doors, and I hope the book sparks insightful conversations.

*Thank you for reading!*

## Key Themes

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The following themes run throughout *Displaced* and may serve as anchors for conversation:

**Home and Belonging.** What makes a place *home*? How is identity bound up in physical place, and what do we carry with us when that place is gone?

**Grief and Loss.** The book navigates multiple registers of grief: people, places, a version of a life. How does grief transform over time?

**Community and Survival.** Unexpected bonds form in the aftermath of disaster. Explore how strangers become lifelines and how communities reassemble themselves.

**Race, Class, and Disaster.** Katrina laid bare deep inequalities in who was helped, who was left behind, and whose losses were mourned publicly.

**Resilience and Starting Over.** What does it take to begin again? How do people find the capacity to rebuild — not just structures, but selves?

**Memory and Storytelling.** How does the act of writing a memoir shape, and perhaps reshape, the past? What is the relationship between memory, truth, and healing?

## Discussion Questions

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### *Part One: Before the Storm*

Questions about the life Kerr describes before Katrina, and how she frames what was about to be lost.

1. How does Kerr portray New Orleans before the storm? What details does she choose to preserve, and what do those choices tell you about what the city meant to her?
2. Before reading *Displaced*, what were your assumptions or memories of Hurricane Katrina? Did the memoir challenge or deepen any of them?
3. Kerr writes about the life she had built in New Orleans. What does "building a life" in a place mean to you personally?

### *Part Two: Evacuation and Crisis*

Questions about the evacuation period, the chaos of the immediate aftermath, and how Kerr depicts those first hours and days.

4. How does Kerr convey the speed and disorientation of the flooding? Were there moments that felt almost unreal to you as a reader? What created that effect?
5. In disaster situations, decisions must be made in minutes. Were there choices Kerr describes — her own or others' — that you found yourself second-guessing or fully understanding? Why?
6. Kerr describes unexpected bonds between people during the flood. Did any of those moments surprise you? What do they suggest about human nature under extreme pressure?

### *Part Three: Starting Over*

Questions about displacement, the long aftermath, and the process of rebuilding.

7. Displacement is not just physical. It is emotional, social, and psychological. How does the memoir show those different layers of dislocation?
8. Kerr writes about the "surreal reality of starting over." Have you ever had to start over in a significant way? How did your experience compare to what was described?
9. Grief takes different shapes throughout the book. Which portrayal of grief felt most true to your own understanding of loss?

### **Memory, Writing, and Truth**

Questions about the craft and ethics of memoir.

10. Memoir is a form that depends on memory, which is always imperfect. Did you ever find yourself wondering about the gap between the events as they happened and as Kerr recounts them? Does that gap matter to you as a reader?
11. What is gained, and what is risked, when someone makes their trauma public through writing? Do you think Kerr's act of writing this book is also an act of healing?
12. Whose stories of Katrina have you heard most often? Whose have been harder to find? How does *Displaced* fit into the broader historical record of the storm?

### **Broader Reflections**

Questions that connect the memoir to larger themes and to your own life.

13. The title *Displaced* works on multiple levels. By the end of the book, what meanings had it taken on for you?
14. Do you feel this memoir spoke to you personally, even if your own experiences of loss have been different?
15. If you could ask the author one question, what would it be?

## **For Further Reading and Viewing**

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If *Displaced* sparked your curiosity about Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans, your group may enjoy exploring the following:

**Books:** *Zeitoun* by Dave Eggers; *One Dead in Attic* by Chris Rose; *The Great Deluge* by Douglas Brinkley (historical account).

**Film and Documentary:** *When the Levees Broke* (Spike Lee, 2006); *Trouble the Water* (2008 documentary); *If God Is Willing and da Creek Don't Rise* (Spike Lee, 2010).

**For Context:** The Pulitzer Prize–winning Times-Picayune newspaper coverage of Katrina is available in archive form and offers an immediate, on-the-ground account of events as they unfolded.