

Jetson's Journey

A Discussion Guide

Brock Alston · Natchez Press · brockalston.com/bookclub

This guide assumes you've finished the book. It discusses the ending.

There are six questions printed in the back of the novel. They ask about the ending without giving it away. This guide gives it away. Everything below assumes the last chapter and the epilogue are behind you.

The first six are the same six from the book. Under each I've added a way to go further. After those come ten more that only make sense once you know how it ends. None of them has a right answer. I have opinions on most of them and would rather hear yours.

—Brock

The six from the book, and a way further in

1. Michael believes he's protecting the people he loves by keeping his troubles to himself. Have you ever done the same? Where is the line between protecting someone and shutting them out?

Going deeper. Michael's silence fails him twice—first in California, then in Franklin. In Chapter 36 Claire asks, "No more secrets?" and he decides the California debt doesn't count: "a thing that's settled and buried isn't a secret. It's just the past." Is he lying to her in that moment, or to himself? Does the difference matter?

Going deeper. The first person in the novel to call the lie a lie is seven years old: "You always say 'grown-up stuff' when you're lying." What do the children in this book see that the adults won't?

2. When the Parkers hand Jetson to the Sawyers, they say he "had a rough start." How does this dog change the family—and later, how does he change the way Michael rebuilds his life in Franklin?

Going deeper. The Parkers leave a newspaper clipping in Jetson's folder on the day they hand him over. Nobody reads it until Chapter 24. Why does the book make Michael—and you—wait that long to learn what the rough start was? What changes once he knows?

Going deeper. In the piece Michael reads at the writing seminar, he gives Jetson a voice: "I was given to him. But I chose to stay." How much of what Jetson does in this novel is a dog being a dog, and how much is what Michael needs him to be? Does the book want you to decide?

3. Michael and Claire have both lost people they loved. What draws them toward each other, and what makes trusting each other so hard?

Going deeper. When the truth finally comes out, Claire sets terms and makes Michael say them back to her: “If I lie to you again, you’re gone.” Are those the right terms? Would you have offered them at all?

Going deeper. On Christmas morning Claire holds Michael to account—“That’s on you”—and then owns a piece of it herself: she was the one who argued that nothing would happen before the deadline. Why does the book give her that admission? What would the scene lose without it?

4. Franklin almost functions as a character—Gray’s on Main, the bookshop, the neighbors who notice you. What part does community play in Michael’s healing? Is there a place like that in your own life?

Going deeper. Joe spends a year and some watching Michael from next door, and for a while Michael believes Joe poisoned his dog. Joe is also the one who finds Jetson in the woods, and the one Michael calls on the worst day of his Franklin life. “We’re neighbors,” Joe says. “Good ones or bad ones, that’s up to us.” What does this novel think a neighbor is?

Going deeper. The newspaper profile is how Franklin comes to know Michael’s story. It is also how his past finds him. Is the book arguing that being known is worth what it costs?

5. Michael can write the truth in his book long before he can say it out loud to Claire. Why do you think that is? Has writing, or any creative outlet, ever helped you say something you couldn’t otherwise?

Going deeper. Patrick tells Michael, “Don’t think of it as a career. Think of it as a practice.” By the end of the novel, what has the practice done for Michael that a career never did?

Going deeper. Michael’s Christmas present to Claire is a rare copy of the book that made her a bookseller. Then he hands her his phone: “The book wasn’t really the gift,” he says. “It’s the part I couldn’t wrap.” Her answer is to ask him to read it aloud: “I want to hear you say it.” Why isn’t reading it on the screen enough for her?

6. By the end, has Michael found peace, a second chance, redemption—or something else? What do you imagine happens next for him, Claire, and Jetson?

Going deeper. The last chapters keep declining one particular word. With Joe: “Not forgiveness exactly,” Michael thinks. With Claire: “I’m not ready to forgive you,” she says. With Elana: “It isn’t forgiveness.” What is the book offering in its place? Is it enough—for them, and for you as a reader?

After the last page

7. Elana tells Michael, “You didn’t put them on that plane. You built the road that led to the airport.” She says the two are not the same thing, and not different enough for comfort. Do you accept her distinction? Does Michael?
8. “I’ve kept my own silences for two years, Michael. Don’t think you invented them.” Nearly everyone in this novel is holding something back—Amber from her mother, Elana from Michael, Joe from the man next door, Claire with the poems she never showed anyone. Which silences does the book treat as kindness, and which as harm? How does it tell them apart?
9. With Claire and Jetson taken, the climax of the novel turns on a phone call: “Joe, I need help.” Why is that sentence harder for Michael than anything the men from California demand of him? Look back at the help that arrived before he asked—Rafe at the Oklahoma diner, the search party in his kitchen. What had to change before he could ask?
10. For two years Michael calls Anna’s painting a gift. On the last day of the novel he finds a different word: “It was a pardon.” What changes when he renames it? Have you ever understood a gift differently years after it was given?
11. Anna’s poem has been on the back of the canvas since Chapter 13, and Michael cannot read past its first line until the writing is finished. Why does the book make finishing the writing the condition for reading it?
12. Michael plans to fund a place in Anna’s treatment program every year, and to do it quietly. Elana stops him: “Not anonymously.” Then: “Her name was Anna. Let some mother stand in a hospital hallway and say it out loud.” This is a novel that distrusts secrecy. Why does Elana hear anonymity as one more version of it? Is she right?
13. Amber leaves the novel in Chapter 12, and the final chapter changes what we know about why she was on that flight: “It was an evacuation.” How did that revision change your view of her? Of Michael? Why do you think the book holds it back until he can say it to Elana’s face?
14. The novel opens with Michael being fired from a job he was good at. Near the end, an old colleague lines up an interview for a new one—a different company, a senior role, back in San Francisco—and Michael calls to decline before the meeting ever happens: “I have something worth building.” What does this book think work is for?
15. A craft question. The California chapters end on a countdown—the days left, the dollars owed. The Franklin chapters tend to end on a dog asleep, a light coming on in a window, the word “Home.” How did that change of rhythm shape your reading? When the countdown returns late in the book, did it feel earned?

- 16.** The Author’s Note names three instincts that nearly cost Michael everything a second time: gripping harder, carrying the weight alone, hiding what frightens him. Then it says, “Everything I love, I love on loan.” Set that beside the epigraph: “Grace rarely announces itself. Sometimes it just lies at your feet.” Where in the novel does grace arrive unannounced—and where is it not the dog?

If you’re running the evening

One meeting, about an hour. Questions 4, 2, 1, 9, 6, 16, in that order. Start with the town. End with grace.

Two meetings. Split the book at Chapter 20. First night: questions 2, 4, and 5, without the going-deeper prompts. Second night: everything else.

Say this first. Tonight the ending is on the table. Every question here assumes it, so settle that out loud before someone spends the evening tiptoeing around it.

I’ll join your club

I take a limited number of virtual book-club visits each season. If your club is reading *Jetson’s Journey*, ask here: brockalston.com/contact.