

Study Guide for *Uncommon Dreams*

Uncommon Dreams is a story with many layers. Below are several options for study, each exploring a different layer. These are helpful for processing the storyline as you read or after you have read *Uncommon Dreams*. They are also helpful for a women's discussion group or a book club.

A. The Female Characters

Four of the female characters in the book are examined below through different sets of questions. Take a character a week for an in-depth study, or choose several questions out of each section for a one-time study.

The questions below will encourage you to consider how Greta Jenkins, Ellie Little, Greta Little and Denise Arthur each made choices unique to them and the resulting impact of their lives on others. As you study them, consider how you are created to be a unique creation of God's, made in His image, with the ability to make choices unique to you. Your choices will impact the lives of those around you, too.

Greta Jenkins finds contentment in the fruit of her hard work.

1. How similar is Greta's life to the life of your grandmother or great-grandmother?
2. Do you think Greta's faith factored into her approach to life's problems?

3. What do you learn from Greta?
4. How are you similar to Greta Jenkins? How are you different?
5. What about Greta's 1940's rural lifestyle do you like? What don't you like?

Ellie Little is the small town wife who longs for children and lets her disappointments overshadow her talents.

1. How are you similar to Ellie? How are you different?
2. What do you think of Ellie's life choices?
3. Why do you think Ellie threw out her paintings when Karl left her?
4. Why did Ellie take Karl back? Can you identify with her at all in this regard?
5. Why would Ellie resume painting at the end of her life?
6. How many times did Ellie forgive Karl? How many times have you forgiven someone?
7. What helped her forgive?
8. Did Ellie's choice regarding her illness bother you?
9. What do you think of her deathbed confession?

Greta Little, the daughter and granddaughter, finds success in the big city and would rather not see the dark side of life.

1. How is Greta's life different from her mother's and grandmother's lives?
2. Do you identify with Greta in any way?
3. What is your definition of success?

4. What do you think of Greta's relationship with her mother?
5. What about Aidan appealed most to Greta?
6. Have you ever had friends like Pem and Denise?
7. How do you react when you see abusive behavior around you?
8. What do you think of Greta's relationship with Jake?
9. What might have happened if Greta never reached out to God with honesty?
10. How did her circumstances change after her prayer? How did she change?
11. Greta only realized her relationship with Geoffrey was abusive years afterwards. Why do you think that is?
12. What do you think of her efforts to help those in abusive situations?
13. How would Greta define success after all that happened?

Denise Arthur – a senator's daughter, the wife of an abuser, living in the dark side of life, is completely unaware of how to escape it.

1. Denise was kind, smart and financially secure. Why do you think she stayed with Pem?
2. Name some of the ways Pem hid his abuse from others.
3. What were some of the ways Denise enabled Pem to control her?
4. What could Denise have done differently?
5. Are there ways you enable hurtful behaviors in those you know or love?
6. Are there people in your life who need safe people?
7. What are some ways you could help those who are abused?

8. What steps can you take to protect yourself from abusive situations?
9. Do you have safe people you can talk with if you're abused?
10. Do you where to reach out for help in your community if you are abused?
11. What steps make up a good safety plan for an abused person?
12. Do you know how your local churches handle abusive marriages?

Further Discussion Topics

B. How Much Should a Parent Tell Their Child?

Ellie chooses not to tell her daughter, Greta, about the early years of her marriage with Karl until very late in life. This news offers clarity that ultimately helps Greta. However, we learn that Greta's half-sister, Mel, heard all the details about her own mother's relationships at an early age. While some parents tell too much to their young children, some parents do not share many details about their lives or marriage even when their children are adults.

What are your thoughts on this? Are there things about your parent's lives that you wish you understood better? Should parents wait to share until their adult child asks? How much of the past should be passed on to future generations? What are some of the positive reasons why it's good to share details, and what are some reasons why it's best not to share details? What if a spouse has died or the couple is divorced? Should the remaining spouse share details of their former spouse's life?

C. What Does it Mean in Psalm 23, “He restores my soul”?

Another version of Psalm 23 says, “He refreshes my soul”. What causes your soul to need refreshing? In the story, Greta Little was under a great deal of pressure at work and had a boss who often focused more on the bottom line than her employee’s well-being. What does this do to an employee? What can an employee do about it? We also find out that Greta works evenings, weekends and holidays. How much of her need for refreshing came from her own choices?

Greta first heard the words “He restores my soul” at her mother’s funeral. Such an enormous loss would naturally deplete her soul with sorrow. She had also just heard her mother’s deathbed confession. How much of an impact would such news have on you? What other circumstances deplete our souls? Can you think of any other characters in the book whose souls may have needed restoration?

How did Greta respond to her need for restoration? When we feel the need for refreshing or restoration, common advice tells us to take better care of ourselves. Exercise. Eat healthy. Get plenty of rest. Get a massage, or a mani/pedi, or a new hairstyle. The list goes on and on. But in Psalm 23 it says, “He restores my soul.” What does this say about our efforts to refresh our souls? What do you think restoration meant to Greta at the end of the book? Elaborate on this. How does God refresh or restore souls? How

might you need refreshing now? How do you hope God will restore you? Do you want him to? Are you asking him to restore you?

D. Greta's Spiritual Journey

Greta considered herself an atheist at the beginning of the story. What does it mean to be an atheist? Did Greta fit that definition? What are some of the reasons why people distance themselves from God? Why did Ellie turn away from God? Why did Greta? How much did your parent's beliefs about God impact you? If you have children, how much do your religious beliefs impact your children?

Do you think Greta's Aunt Ruth and Aunt Charlotte were too pushy about their own opinions when it came to Ellie's beliefs and her funeral? Were they loving as they explained their understanding of the situation? What was the result of their conversation? Did Greta have hard feelings towards them?

What did you think of Doc praying with Ellie and Greta? What would you do if your doctor asked to pray with you? What impact did he have on Ellie, Greta and Aidan?

How much of what Greta learned from Doc, and from her aunts and Aidan impact her when it comes to her faith journey? What else impacted her journey? What made the biggest difference in her relationship with God? What has made the biggest difference in your relationship with God? Do

you want to have a heart to heart with God? When is a good time to do this?

E. The Role of the Church in Abusive Relationships

Greta knew very little about how church leaders help couples where there is abuse. Woven into the story were different perspectives on the help or advice given to abused women. Do you think couples have expectations about what their church can offer? Were Autumn's fears realistic or unrealistic? What did you think of Lana's actions regarding abuse in her church? What did you think of Greta's reaction when she found out that pastors seldom receive training on helping abused women?

At one point Greta offered her perspective on counseling a couple together when there is abuse. Often marriage counselors and pastors tell couples they are each responsible for the problems in their marriages. They may say, "It takes two to tango." Or, "Each person is equally responsible for the breakdown in the relationship." Can you think of ways this would be detrimental to an abused woman? How would it be helpful in a marriage without abuse? Give examples of different scenarios.

Let's go beyond just the responsibilities of church leaders and consider how the church as a whole can help abused women. First, why do you think those attending church have a responsibility to help others? What are some practical ways a church can help both the husband and the wife? How do the churches you know handle abusive marriages? In light of the

fact that one in four women is abused in an intimate relationship, what might be some steps to help women before, during and after an abusive relationship? (That number is narrowing down now to 1:3.)

F. Helping a Woman You Know Who Is or Has Been Abused

With the prevalence of abuse, who among those you know may have been or is being abused? How do you know? Do you feel adequate to offer support to an abused woman? What are some of the things Greta did to help Autumn? What are some things you would feel comfortable doing? What are some ways one might want to help but might do more harm than good? What are some things you can do to be prepared to help a woman in need?

G. Recognizing Abuse in Your Past

Sometimes we don't realize that how we have been treated has impacted us deeply. How did Greta first describe her relationship with Geoffrey Tate? What does this tell you about her? How did what she went through with Geoffrey impact Greta? Did any of Greta's responses resonate with your own? Do you think Greta's response to Pem's treatment of Denise had anything to do with her own past? What brought about her realization of the truth about Geoffrey? How did she respond? What else might Greta do to heal? How long might healing take? What about Aidan's response to his past? Did this surprise you? What are some helpful ways to deal with abuse once it's passed but the impact lingers?

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