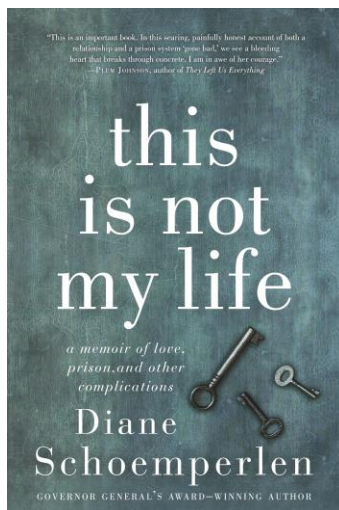


Reading Guide

Welcome to the Turn the Page Book Club, a community reading project to get people thinking and talking about justice, stigma, and creating safe communities.



THIS IS NOT MY LIFE is Governor General Award winning writer Diane Schoemperlen's memoir of her long-term relationship with a prison inmate. The story of their relationship covers tough issues tied to root causes of crime, such as family violence, sexual violence, and problematic substance use. Schoemperlen is unflinching in assessing her own motivations for staying in the relationship, as she comes to know the shadow that institutionalization casts over inmates and their loved ones.

Please be aware that this book contains some scenes of violence. If you or someone you know is triggered by this content, a list of crisis support lines follows the discussion questions.

How to use this Reading Guide

This guide has two types of questions. The Discussion Questions are intended to spark conversations between friends, neighbours, and book group members – using the author's story as a stepping stone to themes of justice, stigma and healthy relationships. For those who want to go further, the Digging Deeper Questions offer lots of room to consider program and policy changes at the community level and beyond.

Discussion Questions

- 1) Many of Diane's friends were uncomfortable with her decision to have a relationship with Shane. How did your view of Diane's choices change as you read the book?
- 2) What impact did Diane's story have on the stereotypes you might have held about prison inmates and their loved ones?

- 3) What ethical responsibility does a memoirist have in telling her story, especially when that story involves others? How do you think Diane fares in meeting this responsibility?
- 4) Looking back on the period after Shane moved in with her, Diane writes about going into the bathroom several times a day “to look at myself in the mirror, checking to see if I was still me...” (see p. 159). As a reader, when (if ever) did you begin to suspect that Shane and Diane’s relationship had elements of emotional abuse? What were some of the signs you noticed?
- 5) If you made relationship choices similar to Diane’s how do you imagine your friends and family would respond? What would you need from them? What if you found yourself falling into relationship patterns similar to Shane’s? What support would you need?
- 6) On p. 187 Diane writes, “I finally began to understand what institutionalization really meant.” What did Diane discover about institutionalization? How did your own understanding about institutionalization change after reading this book?
- 7) As a volunteer at Vinnie’s, Diane made it a rule for herself not to judge the patrons or other volunteers (see p. 6).
 - a. As the reader, what judgements did you find yourself making as you followed Diane through her story?
 - b. How does shame play a role in keeping people, often women, in abusive relationships?
- 8) As Diane writes on page 32, “Only convicted criminals... are forever defined and labelled by the worst thing they have ever done in their lives.” What would it be like if everyone was required to wear a sign revealing the worst thing they’ve done?
- 9) Discuss the ethics of writing and selling stories connected to people’s victimization.

Digging Deeper

- 1) The story of Shane’s childhood and young adult life bring attention to some of the [root causes of crime](#). What resources or supports would have changed Shane’s story? What part of his story would you go back to change if you could, and how?
- 2) What could have changed Diane’s story? What are some of the resources and supports that could have been put in place to prevent or respond earlier to her experience of victimization?

- 3) Institutionalization ill prepares people for living out in the community. If people didn't trust authority figures before incarceration, it will be worse after. What policies and programs could help inmates to transition more successfully to life outside of prison?
- 4) A criminal record significantly reduces a person's employability. For example, job applications that ask about criminal records screen ex-offenders out before they even have a chance at an interview. Yet without meaningful work, ex-offenders are more likely to fall back into criminal behaviors. What other approaches can employers take to give opportunity to qualified applicants with a criminal record, while also minimizing risk to their workplace?
- 5) The federal government committed to looking at incorporating [Restorative Justice](#) into Canada's criminal justice system (see Trudeau's [mandate letter](#) to the Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada). What would restorative justice have looked like in Shane's case? What opportunities would come from addressing crime in this way?

Local Crisis Lines

Supportive and Confidential Listening – 519-745-1166

Here 24/7 for Addictions, Mental Health & Crisis Services 1-844-437-3247

Youth Line – 519-745-9909

24-hour Support Line for Sexual Violence Survivors – 519-741-8633

Mental Health and Addictions Database Line – 519-744-5594

Disclaimer:

The Waterloo Region Crime Prevention Council brings public education & engagement opportunities with the goal of increasing dialogue about crime prevention. This does not comprise an endorsement by the WRPCPC or any of its members of the content or the presenters' views. WRPCPC believes that courageous exploration of complex social issues builds community.