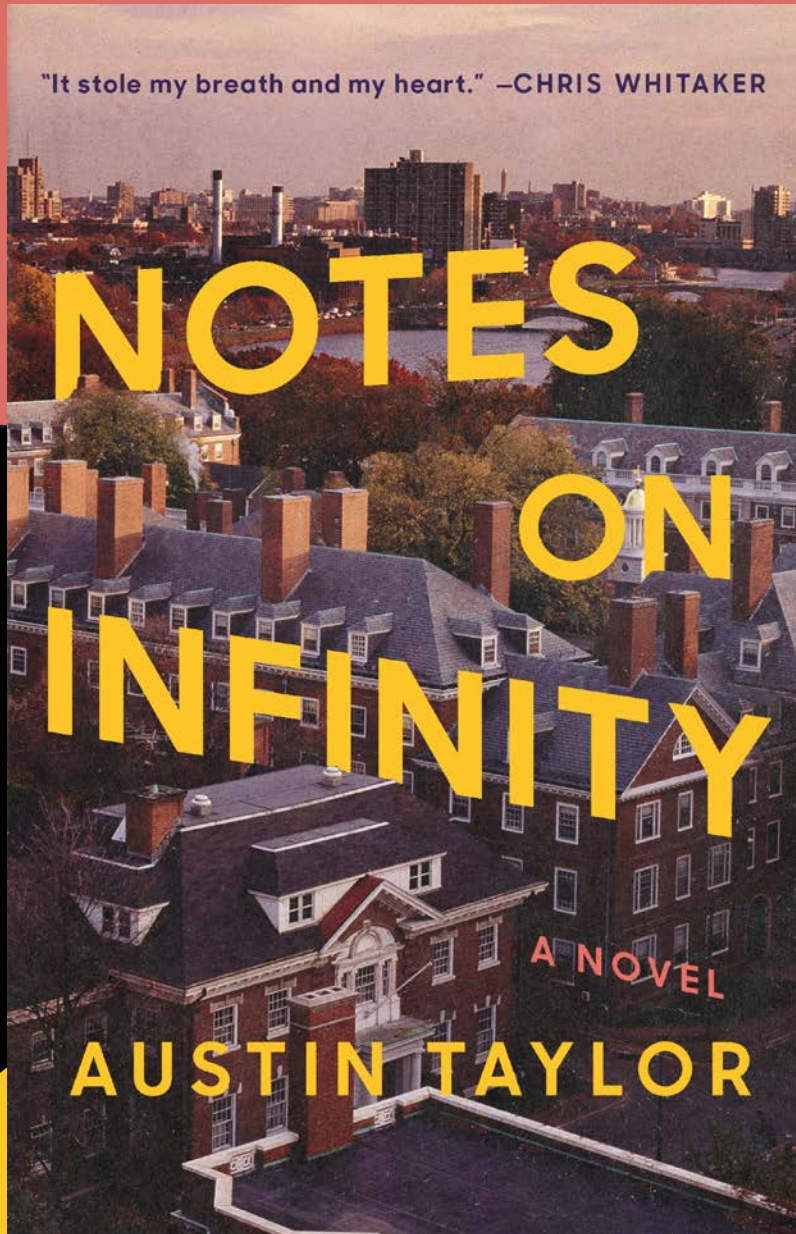


Book Club Kit



**"MESMERIC, AND BEAUTIFUL...IT STOLE
MY BREATH AND MY HEART....I REALLY
COULDN'T HAVE LOVED IT MORE. "**

—CHRIS WHITAKER, AUTHOR OF *WE BEGIN AT THE END*

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the main characters. How did you relate to Zoe or Jack? In what ways were they each set up for success? Or for failure?
2. How did Zoe's relationship with her family affect her path in life?
3. At what point should Jack have told Zoe that the experiments weren't going as well as they had hoped?
4. Discuss the motivations behind Jack's lies and secrets. Do you think any of his deception was justified? What emotions were behind his decisions?
5. What responsibilities did Carter have to Zoe as a partner in the company? Would it have made a difference if he had told her about the bad data? Would she have been receptive? Could the company have course-corrected?
6. Once Zoe found out about Jack's secret, she had a big decision to make. Discuss the complexities of her choice. What would you have done? Did she do the right thing?
7. Was Zoe's gender important to her trajectory? Discuss the themes that come up around women in STEM, women at Harvard, women in the tech start-up space, and how women entrepreneurs are depicted or criticized in the media.
8. Were the Manna whistleblowers fair in their public criticism, or were they just trying to have their own moment in the spotlight?
9. Have you seen stories in the news where entrepreneurs are idolized? Where they've fallen from grace? How does *Notes on Infinity* differ from the stories you've heard?

Discussion Questions

10. Did Jack's past come as a surprise? And does that past excuse his actions in the present? Does Jack deserve Zoe's sympathy and love, even after his deception?
11. Why do you think the author chose to tell a section of the book from Jack's point of view?
12. As you got closer to the end of the novel, how did you think it would conclude? Were you surprised by the ending?
13. Do you think we'll ever get to a point where science can help us live for hundreds of years? What are the repercussions of inventing a drug that could extend human life, or even help people live forever? How do you think this would change the nature of humanity? If given the opportunity, would you want to take it?
14. Where do you see Zoe ten years after the events of the book?



AN INTERVIEW

with Austin Taylor



AUSTIN TAYLOR graduated from Harvard University in 2021 with a joint degree in chemistry and English. *Notes on Infinity* is inspired in part by her undergraduate studies, peers, and lab work in Harvard's chemistry department. She has also worked as a public speaking coach and in science policy. Austin is a private pilot, a registered Maine guide, and a bassist. She grew up in central Maine, where she now lives and writes. She will begin her legal education at Stanford Law School as a Knight-Hennessy Scholar in the fall of 2025.

Congratulations on your beautiful and magnetic debut novel, *Notes on Infinity*, about two university students who think they've found the cure to aging. Being only a few years out of school yourself, please tell us how this novel came to be.

As an undergraduate studying chemistry, I was thrilled by the incredible cutting-edge science being done all around me, and by the constantly felt legacy of the world-changing work that has been done at Harvard in the past. I'd walk through the Yard, and think, "How am I here?" At the same time, my classmates were talking about start-ups. There was this collective dream, fostered by the drama of the place, of being the one to invent something earth-shattering, drop out, and become the next Zuckerberg or Gates. That feeling of being young and surrounded by brilliant people and incredible opportunities, everything full of sparkling, crystalline possibility — with this edge of fear that it's all going to shatter — that's the feeling that inspired *Notes on Infinity*.

We've all heard the real life cautionary tales of biotech start-ups, with their spectacular successes and failures, although most of us will never experience it firsthand. What do you think *Notes on Infinity* could add to our collective understanding of this singular and rarified culture?

We've all watched the dizzying rises and devastating falls of several start-ups over the past 10 years or so — fueled, of course, by enormous amounts of venture capital. There's a lot to say about the incentives for scientists in the start-up space created by the VC funding model (not that the incentive structure in academia is perfect), and I hope that *Notes* prompts readers to think critically about the ways in which how we fund science impacts how we do science. But more importantly — and this is true of everything I write — I hope that my work helps readers feel empathy. I think we tend to forget that the people behind flashy news stories are just that: people. I wanted to tell a story that helped readers truly understand my characters and the decisions — disastrous, at times, but ever so human — that they make.

More than halfway through the novel, the point of view changes, brilliantly shifting the reader's experience and understanding of the story. Was it always your intention to tell the story from more than one viewpoint?

I sent an email to my agent, Katie, during the very early stages of work with exactly this question. It reads: "The other thing that I'll flag for you to consider (though we can talk about it later!) is that I'm trying to figure out if I should tell any of the story from Jack's perspective. On the one hand, that becomes difficult [given plot elements]. On the other, his background (poor, white, rural, desperate to get out) will be hard to understand fully through the eyes of someone like Zoe, I think."

As I wrote the first half of the book, it became obvious that I did need to move to Jack's perspective. Partly because of the narrative problem I mention in that email, and partly because it was becoming increasingly clear to me that the book is really about relationships — the ways you can know someone and the ways you can't. Zoe and Jack are as close as two people can get, as collaborators and partners and lovers, and yet they're limited to their own experiences of the world. I felt like I, and readers, needed to see certain moments through Jack's eyes to fully understand the limits of Zoe and Jack's understanding of each other, the disjoints and miscommunications that are, ultimately, the biggest tragedies of the book.

***Notes on Infinity* grapples with big ideas, like "What if you could live forever?" and "What ethical lines would you cross in the name of love or self-preservation?" What life lessons do you think readers will take from your book?**

First, I did think a lot about immortality, mortality, and legacy as immortality — particularly scientific legacy — while I was writing *Notes*. I don't know that I came to any conclusions, here, but I do hope that readers come away with a sharper awareness of the finite, fragile, precious, tragic nature of being human.

Second, and of course, *Notes* is a classic cautionary Icarus tale — an elegy to the boy who flies too close to the sun.

Third, and most importantly, *Notes* is framed by this huge, glamorous, high-stakes backdrop — but it's a book about regular-size people. More than anything, I hope readers take from *Notes* a willingness to pause in the judgment of others; to accept that the inner lives of other people — their reasons, their experiences, their emotions — are complex and real and powerful; and to try to understand those inner lives a little better. Life is really hard, and empathy is pretty much all we have to get ourselves and each other through it. When the reader learns what Jack has done a little over halfway through the book, I imagine that she — like Zoe — will be shocked, betrayed, enraged. But once the reader lives the story from Jack's perspective, I hope she can understand why he did what he did — and love him, not just despite, but because.