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# BOOK CLUB KIT

“A searing, soaring coming-of-age story that unfolds under the most unconventional of circumstances.” —HOPE EDELMAN, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Motherless Daughters*

# Forager

FIELD NOTES  
for SURVIVING a  
FAMILY CULT



A Memoir

# Michelle Dowd

Dear Reader,

When I was young, I thought of foraging as a survival tool. Eating off the land was a way to stave off the discomfort of hunger, thirst and cold. But writing into the memories of the mountain of my youth, I came to realize that what I learned from foraging extends far beyond the primal need for food.

Foraging taught me that wherever I am, no matter how lonely, something around me is growing. Look for the signs. Notice the light and shadows, the animal trails, the potential waterways.

Paying attention is a form of connection.

I have been lost more times than I can count, and sometimes, I've made things worse for myself. I've felt my surroundings closing in on me. I've run or wandered frantically in a direction that took me back to where I started, unaware that humans are prone to circular movement. I failed to notice landmarks or failed to remember them. I lost track of how far I'd traveled, and in which direction.

But even when I thought I had nothing, everything around me was an invisible web of information and communication. I just needed to learn to read it.

I spent my young adulthood fascinated by people who felt safe in the world, who received the nurturing, comfort and belonging they craved as children, whose physical and emotional needs were met by adults who recognized and validated them.

But those are not my people.

My people are those who have clawed their way out of a life that didn't make sense to them, who climbed out of poverty or conformity or narrow-minded intolerance, people who were hurt in the name of love. I stand in solidarity with those who have found tools to hoist their way out of dark holes toward a light they couldn't comprehend, people who have scratched and clawed and fought for every ounce of affection they could find, so they know what love tastes like, what it smells like, and how to find it when the shadows fall.

My people know what love costs, and what it's worth.

Since *Forager: Field Notes for Surviving a Family Cult* has been released into the world, I am grateful to have heard from so many readers who relate to the idea of foraging for what they need—readers who recognize a deep hunger for love or touch, for understanding, community, connection, or healing—who have found the resilience and strength they needed and have been helped by hearing my story.

I hope my journey of self-discovery inspires you to spend a little more time outdoors, noticing what's around you, connecting with non-human friends, finding community on this generative earth we share.

Thank you so much for reading. I look forward to hearing your own story, and the foraging that's helped you survive.

Stay wild,

**Michelle**

## Questions for Discussion

# Forager

*FIELD NOTES for SURVIVING a FAMILY CULT*

A Memoir by Michelle Dowd

1. *Forager* begins with an author's note that states, "This is a work of memory, but I have done my best to tell a truthful story."

How important do you think it is for a memoir to consider other people's viewpoints? How much should other people's perceptions, opinions, and "truths" affect the way we view our own past?

2. Michelle's mother is a complex character. How would you describe the author's feelings toward her mother? Do you feel the same way about her mom? In what ways did she contribute to Michelle's abuse and in what ways did she set Michelle up to explore freedom?

3. Why is this story told in the present tense? How would the story have changed from the perspective of the author as an adult?

4. Michelle had to learn to forage and sustain herself in nature as a young child. What other ways did her childhood inspire or hinder her ability to survive within her wider family system?

5. What does the word "forage" mean to you? What images does it stir in you? Why does a person forage? What do you forage for?

6. Is there anything more important in life than safety? Would you be willing to forgo safety for freedom? If so, in what context?

7. What does it mean to be truly "seen" by another? How does it feel? Who truly sees Michelle in this book? Who truly sees you?

8. This book illustrates the ways in which religious extremism can influence how parents care for their children. Which parts of this story depict this in ways that stood out to you? Do you think Michelle's family was sincere in their faith, or were they using it to manipulate their followers?

9. How did Michelle's illness and subsequent hospitalizations affect the arc of her story? How might things have been different for her if she'd not gotten so sick?

10. What do you feel Michelle was most hungry for as a child and adolescent? Why did she deny herself nourishment and in what ways did this satisfy her emotional needs?

