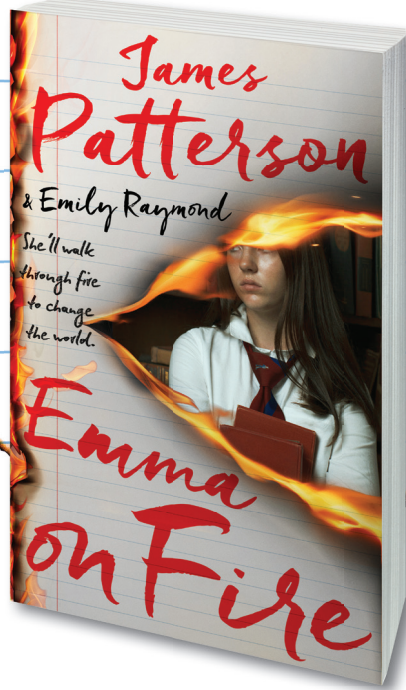


Emma on Fire is an urgent, emotional thriller.



“Dramatic...

explores the power of grief...that through loss there can be hope for the future.”

—Library Journal

Here are some sample questions to help guide a book club discussion about the novel by James Patterson and Emily Raymond.

Please be aware that this book contains multiple references to suicide, suicidal ideation, self-harm, and depression.

Question 1: “Reading isn’t work; reading is escape” (p. 3) is the first opinion shared by the title character, seventeen-year-old Emma Caroline Blake. How do you feel about reading? Are you like Emma, looking to books to ease your daily cares? Or did it take you longer to come to reading as a habit? What formed your opinion about reading? Was it something you came to on your own, or were your feelings influenced by a teacher, a friend, or a book club?

Question 2: Discuss the multiple meanings of the title of this book, *Emma on Fire*. How did your response to the title change from before reading the book to afterward?

Question 3: “Trigger warning, guys. My topic today is self-immolation” (p. 7). Emma uses an essay assignment to make a shocking statement: She’s planning to burn herself alive to force classmates, teachers, and the news media to acknowledge the importance of climate change—and to act on it. Although Emma’s tactics are intentionally dramatic, her desire to make a difference is familiar. Have you encountered an issue that made you want to take a stand? How did you put your feelings into action?

Question 4: “In a crown of flames”, she wanted to write, but then she crossed it out because it sounded too pretentious, which is exactly what she doesn’t want” (p. 11). The more we care about something or someone, the more difficult it can be to express those feelings in written words. Has this happened to you? What’s your strategy—write quickly to capture the essence? Or write, and rewrite, until you’re satisfied with every word?

Question 5: Emma’s private struggles—the loss of her mother to cancer and her sister to suicide—are public knowledge at Ridgemont Academy. Emma confronts Headmaster Peregrine “Perry” Hastings for downplaying their deaths: “You can’t even say the word. I’m going through ‘challenging life changes,’ with ‘extenuating circumstances.’ If you can’t say the word, how can you possibly understand how I feel?” (p. 22). Think about a time when you haven’t been sure what to say to a person who’s struggling. Is it better to be direct but possibly traumatizing, or is it kinder not to focus on the suffering that a person may be experiencing?

Question 6: When Headmaster Hastings calls Emma’s father, Byron Blake, the conversation reminds Emma of the pain she’s experienced from adults misunderstanding and dismissing her experiences. Her conclusion: “The

body heals so much faster than the heart” (p. 63). Can you think of a time when someone you respected and admired left you badly disappointed? Were you able to use that experience to modify your own behavior and how you treat people who view you as a mentor?

Question 7: “Most kids elbow past Emma, giving her a wide berth, like they might catch her crazy” (p. 69). Ironically, a common response to someone drawing attention to themselves with controversial words or actions is for other people to ignore them rather than interact. Why is it so frightening to engage with those who choose to be different?

Question 8: When Emma meets with the school therapist, Lori Bly, Lori says two words that move Emma to tears: “I’m listening” (p. 78). Can you think of a time when a teacher or counselor made a difference in your life? Why do you think that moment feels so powerful to Emma? Do you think speaking and listening can be equally powerful, or is one more important than the other?

Question 9: Emma makes a series of “FIRE VIDEOS” that go viral and create a ticking clock toward her planned suicide. The comments range from concern for Emma (“DON’T DO IT”, p. 161) to would-be copycats (“gotta get as brave as this girl and just do it”, p. 218). Discuss how social media can be used as both a positive and negative tool amid moments with real-life potential life-or-death consequences.

Question 10: A newspaper profile of Emma asks whether she’s “a martyr for a generation” or “a teen grappling with deep-seated depression like so many of our young people” (p. 166). How do you see Emma? How would you answer the reporter’s questions?

Question 11: Ultimately, Emma decides: “We may feel helpless, but we aren’t hopeless” (p. 231). How does this statement reflect Emma’s emotional journey throughout the story? Do you think this stance is a good one to foster important discussions between generations?

Question 12: In the final pages of the story, Emma writes to her late sister, Claire. “I’m going to try to make the world better for others, and for myself”, (p. 239) she tells her. Have you ever made a promise to someone who’s no longer around? Did that make it easier or harder to keep the promise? How do you think Emma’s story continues?