

*Pure: Inside the Evangelical Movement That Shamed a Generation of Young Women and How I Broke Free* by Linda Kay Klein

*This reading group guide for **Pure** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author **Linda Kay Klein**. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

### **Introduction**

In this fascinating look inside white evangelical Christian culture, Linda Kay Klein explores the purity movement that defined her coming of age in the 1990s. Frustrated by her own shame about sex and intimacy, Klein began a twelve-year journey that took her across the country to speak with countless other young women raised in purity culture—women who, like her, were implicitly and explicitly taught that their bodies were dangerous and posed a threat to themselves and others. *Pure* is the result of her extensive research—part history, part journalism, part memoir—and stands as both a chronicle of pain and a testament to what the human spirit can endure. Through it all, Klein’s faith in God remained steady and led her to seek new churches and communities that might better exemplify her understanding of love, God, and fellowship.

### **Topics & Questions for Discussion**

1. In chapter 1, Linda Kay Klein recalls how, at sixteen, she yearned to prove to herself, her God, and her church that “I was good despite my developing body” (page 39). Why does the separation of the spirit from the body come up again and again in *Pure*? Does this imposed separation feel particular to the church, or do you think secular culture also promotes a separation between the spirit and the body?
2. Klein was taught to cover herself so as not to threaten the men in the community with sexual temptation. In this regard, she suggests that women are made to bear the burden of responsibility for ensuring sexual propriety. Discuss this phenomenon from your own experience inside and/or outside a church community.
3. On page 14 Klein concludes that “the purity message is not about sex. Rather, it is about *us*: who we are, who we are expected to be, and who it is said we will become if we fail. . . . This is the language of shame.” Consider how the words (i.e., “pure”) used in purity culture contribute to the sense of shame that Klein and so many others have felt. What word or words stood out to you as you read?
4. Consider the structure of *Pure*: four sections documenting what purity culture is; challenges faced by girls and women in the church as a result of this culture; challenges girls and women face outside of the church as a result of this culture; and how many individuals and even church communities are finding ways to overcome the damage done by purity culture. Why do you think the author structured the book in this way? If you were to add a fifth section, what would it be, and why?

5. When Chloe confides in Klein that she experimented with oral sex (with girls) as an eight-year-old, she tells Klein she was shamed by her parents, and, at the same time, her parents were shamed by the larger church community. Do you believe that shame can be passed on from one generation to the next? Have you ever seen this happen?

6. “You can’t win” (99), one interviewee laments. Have you ever felt this way when it comes to women and sexuality?

8. Share a time in your life when you questioned an important aspect of your upbringing, whether it was a religious belief or a family tradition or lifestyle.

9. In Muriel’s narrative, she shares that she feels God “in her greatest moments of suffering” (page 148), though the experience is different than she had been taught it would be when she was young. Why do you think Muriel feels this way? What experiences have you had as an adult that looked or felt different than you had thought they would feel when you were young?

10. On pages 178–79, Klein presents the idea of “the gap.” How did Klein overcome the gap in her own life? Could the image of the gap serve as a metaphor for the entire book?

11. Discuss the irony in the conclusion Eli draws about the evangelical community: that the “ideology is more important . . . than people” (page 201). In your experience, do churches and/or other institutionalized cultural communities sometimes sacrifice people for ideology (or the individual for “the greater good”)? If this is the case, can such institutions really be considered *communities*? Why or why not?

12. In your experience, have you found, like the interviewee Jo, that “women are taught their bodies are evil; men are taught their minds are” (page 235)? If so, why do you think it is that church and society place so much more attention on women’s bodies than on men’s, and on men’s minds than on women’s?

13. Although *Pure* is a critique of the evangelical purity movement, the author highlights other, positive aspects of the evangelical subculture. On page 276, for example, she describes the “warm, playful teasing” that is typical in the evangelical community. Do you read *Pure* as a criticism of evangelical Christian culture, or as something else?

14. Discuss the ending of the book. Did it surprise you to learn that Klein’s faith is still strong, if different than before? How did she manage to take ownership of her faith, from your point of view? Have you ever had a similar experience, either of taking ownership of your faith or of something else that you first learned about from others?

### **Enhance Your Book Club**

1. Linda Kay Klein invites us into her personal life—even her bedroom—and in *Pure*, readers come to form an intimate relationship with the author. Spend more time with

Klein's candor and honesty. With your book club, watch Klein's TEDx Talk (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bB99HIBT9b4>). Afterward, compare how it felt listening to her voice and watching her speak to reading her words on the page.

2. *Pure* joins the conversation of the #MeToo movement, a conversation that has been long overdue and that is gaining momentum in nearly every industry in the U.S. and abroad. Klein highlights the ways in which evangelical Christianity's purity movement contributes to larger cultural problems, such as silencing and excusing sexual and gender-based violence. Look into the #MeToo and #ChurchToo hashtags on Twitter with your book club. Review the ways in which the narratives feel similar to or different from the narrative that Klein shares in *Pure*. Why do you think this movement is happening at this particular cultural moment?

3. *Pure* offers an ethnographic study of several female experiences in the purity movement. Ethnography, or the "study and systematic recording of human cultures" (*Merriam-Webster*), can be a fun and hands-on way to conduct research about a subculture. Consider all the subcultures you are a part of, whether they are religious groups, community organizations, or enthusiast groups, and conduct your own informal research into one subculture. Talk to friends and family, take pictures, and offer your own creative reflection on what makes the subculture unique. Share with your book club the results of your efforts. You might be surprised to learn something new about your book club members and perhaps even yourself.

### A Conversation with Linda Kay Klein

**Q: *Pure* refers to an extraordinary number of books on shame, religion, and sexuality. If you were to offer one book club suggestion for further reading, which book would it be and why?**

A: *Pure* is about the ways the purity movement shames white evangelical girls, but we are by no means the only ones suffering because of it. Recently I've been learning more about the role that white patriarchal hegemony plays in the purity movement and how this undergirding impacts other communities. Right now I'm reading *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* by the Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas. I highly recommend it for book clubs interested in broadening their understanding of how these teachings impact various communities, starting with the black church.

**Q: What prompted you to begin thinking deeply about the evangelical subculture? Can you pinpoint a specific moment when you felt called to reconsider your relationship to the evangelical church?**

A: If I had to choose just one moment, it would be the moment I write about in the book, when I was sitting on the rocky beach on the edge of the Indian Ocean in Australia and reading those newspaper articles about my youth pastor having attempted to sexually entice a twelve-year-old child under his professional care.

But there's more to that story than I share in the book. The part about my having been in Australia—an ocean away from my religious community—is important. I was too far away to be told how I was “supposed” to feel about what my youth pastor had done when I learned about it; too far away to listen to the sermon I learned about later in which my congregation was instructed never to talk about what happened because that would be gossip, and gossip was a sin; too far away to be pulled aside and informed I shouldn't be angry, but should forgive my youth pastor, and learn to let go of the whole horrible situation.

And so, I *did* talk about what happened.

And I *was* angry.

And I *didn't* let go.

Instead, I wrestled with what happened and how the evangelical church had handled it. And in the midst of that wrestling, I first felt called to reconsider my relationship to the church.

**Q: Do you agree with the interviewee Piper that a real danger of the purity movement is the “hatred of self that comes from that lack of place in the community” (page 66)? How have you dealt with your own “lack of place” after leaving the evangelical community in which you were raised?**

A: To be honest, I experienced a lack of place *inside* the evangelical community more than I ever experienced one outside of it. I first began to feel I didn't belong in the church when I was in my mid-teens. After all, it's hard to feel like you belong when you are constantly being pulled aside and told about all of the ways in which you don't.

After I left, I leaned into a community of creatives. I found my place as a creator—a music-maker, a puppeteer, a performance artist, a visual artist, a writer. I processed the loss of place I had felt in my religious community by writing music, plays, performance pieces, and so on in a creative community.

**Q: Who is your target audience for *Pure*? What message do you hope this audience will receive after reading your book?**

A: This book is written for everyone who has experienced sexual shame. I hope readers will have new questions to ask themselves, and new conversations that they want to have with others. I hope they will feel less alone. I hope they will feel less hopeless, and just a little more ready to break free.

**Q: Describe the research that went into writing this book. What was the process like? Did you uncover any facts that were particularly surprising?**

A: I've spent the past twelve years reading, writing, interviewing, investigating, going to courthouses and public libraries across the country, whatever it took to get to the next answer, which inevitably led me to the next question.

During some of this time, I earned an interdisciplinary master's degree from NYU for which I wrote a thesis focused on white American evangelicalism's gender and sexuality messaging for girls. I also had the privilege of working alongside gender justice activists to create change within the world's major religions, from whom I learned a tremendous amount.

What surprised me most were the egregious forms of sexism and abuse I found among some evangelical leaders and institutions in the process. This book is about how everyday purity culture impacts people, not about extremes, so I chose not to refer to these more heinous ideas and actions, but they still haunt me.

**Q: Your discussion of the experiences of single people in the evangelical culture mirrors our larger cultural bias; that is, bachelorhood is exciting, cool, sexy. For a woman to be single, however, is to be odd, a spinster, or even dangerous. That's the message we're given. From your research and writing, what conclusions can you draw about this?**

A: I believe the legacy of wives being owned by their husbands in this country still haunts us today, emerging in assumptions like it's not okay for a woman to be single too long, though a man has more freedom and flexibility. Rebecca Traister's book *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation* is an awesome resource on single womanhood in America that goes much deeper than I can take readers.

**Q: Do you hope to break any stereotypes with this book? What is the most important stereotype you'd like to shatter?**

A: I think it's fair to say this entire book is about shattering stereotypes—gender stereotypes, sexual stereotypes, religious stereotypes: they all distance us from our whole selves (and from the whole selves of others). In fact, you might even say that the way we sum one another up using stereotypes is what make shaming possible. We all know what the stereotype of a “bad girl” is, for example. Our cultural agreement around the definition of that term is what gives it its shaming punch for a young woman who is called one or who fears being thought of as one.

**Q: Do you agree that in the end *Pure* is ultimately about *how* you wrote as much as what you wrote—a book about writing a book on a difficult, personal topic? Why did you decide to take this meta-approach to telling this story?**

A: A huge part of my healing journey was performing interviews for this book. Essentially, I put myself through narrative therapy—telling my story over and over again and hearing shades of my story told back to me in the stories of others. And, as it turns out, the interviews did the same for many of my interviewees.

There was a seven-to-ten-year gap between my first and last interviews with many people. In our last interviews, I was surprised by how many people told me our first interviews had changed their lives. They said they had never been asked questions like the ones I had asked them before. For many, it was the first time they had reflected on the messages they had been raised with and how they had impacted them. They added that they felt less alone after our interview. Hearing that there were others around the country struggling in the same way they were allowed them to stop simply blaming themselves for their shame.

In order for readers to understand how my interviewees and I are healing, it was important to show this process.

Finally, publishing this work—telling the world what, at one point, I couldn't even tell myself—is yet another step in my own healing journey. Overcoming my fears around the inevitable shaming that I will receive as a result of publishing my story—a shaming not too dissimilar from that which, at one time, controlled my life though it was only my immediate community shaming me then—is huge for me. And I wanted to share that with readers as well. Because if any of this is ever going to change, more and more of us have to do just that.

**Q: Although you are an insider in the evangelical movement, certainly some of what you heard over the last twelve years must have come as a surprise. What was the most shocking thing you learned in the course of your interviews and research?**

A: Perhaps the thing that surprised me most in my research was the number of times I heard someone tell me they didn't feel like a person. Many of my interviewees described trying so hard to be who they were “supposed to be” that eventually it became difficult for them to access their true selves, which made them feel like less of a person.

*“I thought, ‘I’m going to take it all on, because that’s how you show people you love them.’ But meanwhile, I just wasn’t a person. I had no self. So much of myself was underground.”*

*“It’s hard for me to say ‘No, I’m not in the mood,’ or ‘No, I’m tired,’ or ‘It’s been a hard day at work.’ Which are valid reasons not to do something. But for some reason, they’re not valid for me. Then, a couple of months ago, I had this thought. I was like, ‘I’m a person, actually. I’m a person.’”*

It wasn't until people stopped hiding their true feelings, thoughts, desires, beliefs, and experiences, both from themselves and others, that their language changed. For example:

*“I really feel like I became fully myself,”* one woman—who had previously told me it was difficult to be both a woman and a person in evangelicalism—said of the period of time after she began telling people about the sexual abuse she had suffered.

*“The more I had the space to keep becoming a person, the more confident in the goodness of God I was,”* another woman told me about the years she spent in

seminary, after having long denied herself the right to attend seminary, in part because she was raised to believe women can't become preachers.

**Q: What advice can you offer someone who feels shamed by their religious or cultural community?**

A: I have to go with my interviewees' advice here:

- 1) Know you are not alone. Not by a long shot.
- 2) Know yourself. Observe your feelings, your thoughts, your beliefs, your experiences. Don't judge them as good or bad, just simply observe them. And when you are ready, wonder, perhaps, about them. Why you said one thing though you thought another. Or why you feel so much shame after doing something you don't actually think was very shameful.
- 3) Trust yourself. You know in your gut that the shaming you are experiencing is wrong. But it can be hard to remember that when shame does its work—trying to convince you that your feelings or your experiences are somehow your fault. Hold on to that gut knowledge. Write down what you know. I mean what you *know*. Remember it. And remind yourself of it, pulling that little piece of paper or section of your journal out, whenever you forget: It *is* wrong.