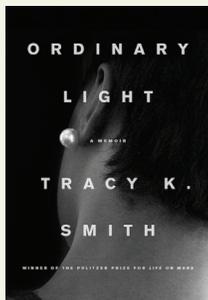


# In Reading Groups

Book Discussion Guide from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

by Jacque Stouffer



## ***Ordinary Light: A Memoir***

by Tracy K. Smith

Pulitzer Prize–winning poet Tracy K. Smith tells her remarkable story, giving us a quietly potent memoir that explores her coming-of-age and the meaning of home against a complex backdrop of race, faith, and the unbreakable bond between a mother and daughter.

*“I wanted to run back through the muddy orchard rows not just to the bright, ordinary light of the house, but to a time and place when someone would be awake in a different room, calling out to us now and again, saying, Isn’t it time you girls were getting to sleep?” (335)*

In her memoir, Tracy Smith shares the story of her mother, or her precious relationship with her mother, and of the precious time we all share of home, family, and light.

1. Where was the ‘ordinary light’ of your childhood? What are those memories like for you?
2. Why do you believe Smith titled her prologue – the story of her mother’s end – “The Miracle”?
3. On page 35, during the Halloween season, a young Tracy wonders “What was it like for God as we went about our lives, doing the things He loved and the things He hated, sometimes without even knowing the difference between the two?” Do you think we don’t know the difference between the two? How would you answer Tracy’s question?
4. When Tracy’s mom suggests she tell her cousin Nina about Jesus (42), Tracy feels nervous, “because I wanted to make a good case, to get it right and convince Nina of how happy she would be...” Did you find that approach believable for a girl her age? What role did Tracy’s mom have in her feeling that way?
5. In the Leroy chapter (52), Tracy recounts her trip to visit her mother’s family in the South. In what ways could you relate to her story? How has visiting your parents’ childhood homes helped you understand your parents?

6. On page 73, as Tracy watches television with Mrs. Kureitza and ponders her question about “white-white teeth,” Tracy notes their difference: “It didn’t stop me from liking her or from thinking of her as an ally or a friend, but it did remind me that simply because of who we were, she and I had been equipped to see certain things differently.”

When have you experienced something similar – and how did you react?

7. Interesting, isn’t it, that Tracy’s parents grew up in an African-American community in the South, then chose a much different neighborhood/city to raise their children. Why, as Tracy said, “was it so important to her that I guard myself against too much sameness with everyone?” (99)
8. As a child in the 70s and early 80s, I have vivid memories of my mother and her friend talking about the rapture. A unique formation in the clouds after a storm – or a curiously empty road or parking lot would cause them to joke that the rapture must have come and we were left behind. Do you remember any of those experiences as a child, and, if so, how did they influence your perception of Christianity and the second coming?

9. How can you relate to the searching – or lack thereof – Tracy went through for a faith of her own, and one she could claim with no reservations, when she first left home?
10. When Tracy agrees to teach Vacation Bible School in the summer after her freshman year, at the end of Theo’s lesson she writes “God is not that small.” Why?
11. One of my favorite quotes in this book is found on page 278. “What starves pain, what forces it to release its grip, is speech, the voice upon which rides the story, *This is what happened; this is what I have refused to let claim me.*” When has telling your story starved the pain for you? Could this be why Tracy wrote her memoir?
12. On page 302, Tracy’s father tells with pride of her mother sharing her salvation story at a North Carolina revival meeting. And Tracy hopes she’ll never have to view it. “I couldn’t fathom indulging the embarrassment, even before myself, of such raw, untempered, hardheaded believing.” Why does Tracy struggle so with her mom’s faith?
13. Tracy spoke often of her mother’s searching, and comes to realize at the end of the memoir that she too is searching. Are we all? What role does God or our faith play in the search?
14. How would you answer the question Tracy poses on page 346: “Is God each of the many different things we seek in the course of a life?” How has God changed for you?
15. In knowing Tracy’s experience and history as a poet, where did you find poetry in her writing? Did her writing style ease your reading or make it more challenging – and why?
16. How was your own childhood and upbringing like Tracy’s? How was it different?
17. Do you think this is a book about Tracy’s faith? Her mother’s faith?

**Jacque Stouffer** lives with her family in Liberty, Missouri, where she works with nonprofit agencies as a specialist in organized fundraising through communication and grant writing. .