



# Jodi Picoult

## Book club discussion questions

### Vanishing Acts

1. When she learns she was kidnapped as a child, Delia's choice of profession takes on a new significance. What motivated Delia to pursue a career in search-and-rescue? Does she view it differently once she knows about her past? A recurrent theme in *Vanishing Acts* is self-identity. Are we products of our pasts, or do we have more control over whom we become?
2. Delia says that as children she, Fitz, and Eric each had their roles: "Fitz was the dreamer; I was the practical tactician. Eric, on the other hand, was the front man: the one who could charm adults or other kids with equal ease." Have they continued these roles into adulthood? How so? Is each one comfortable in his or her role, or is there a longing to be something different?
3. In one instance Eric muses that "there are people in this world who have done worse things than Andrew Hopkins." What is your opinion of what Andrew did— taking Delia away from her mother and creating a new life

for the two of them? From a legal standpoint, is he guilty of a crime? How about from a moral standpoint?

4. Andrew himself says, "Does it really matter why I did it? By now, you've already formed your impression. You believe that an act committed a lifetime ago defines a man, or you believe that a person's past has nothing to do with his future." A person cannot change his or her past actions, but can they make up for the hurt they've caused by helping others? Does the good that Andrew has done for the town of Wexton and for the senior citizens in his care— not to mention the happy childhood he gave Delia— make up for or excuse his taking his daughter? What do you make of Elise's remark to Andrew that Delia "turned out absolutely perfect"?
5. Andrew says, "Believe what you want, but be prepared to answer this question: In my shoes, how do you know you wouldn't have done the same thing?" Would you have done the same thing? If you feel that what Andrew did was wrong, what would have been a more appropriate alternative to ensure Delia's best interests?
6. Eric believes that he does not have "the experience or the wits or the confidence" to represent Andrew. Why then does he agree to take on the case? Why does he continue to act as Andrew's attorney even when it causes tension between him and Delia?
7. In one instance Delia says to Fitz about meeting her mother for the first time, "I want this to be perfect. I want her to be perfect. But what if she's not? What if I'm not?" How does the reality measure up when she finally meets her mother? What kind of understanding do Delia and Elise come to? Why does Elise give Delia the "spell"— is it to help Andrew or her daughter?

8. Delia believes "it takes two people to make a lie work: the person who tells it, and the one who believes it." How do the characters in the novel, including Delia herself, prove this to be true?
9. During the trial, Eric tells the court he is an alcoholic. What does the exchange between Eric and Delia while he is questioning her on the witness stand reveal about their relationship? Do they view each other differently after this exchange? As two people who love alcoholics, how does Delia's treatment of Eric differ from Andrew's treatment of Elise? Whose actions and reactions, given their partner's disease, do you support?
10. Eric says to Andrew, "Everyone deserves a second chance." How does the idea of second chances play out in *Vanishing Acts*? Are there any characters who deserve a second chance and don't get one? And, conversely – are there any characters who do get a second chance – and squander it?
11. In what ways does Elise's alcoholism significantly impact both Delia and Eric, and the choices that they ultimately make?
12. In what way does Delia's romantic relationship with Fitz, while engaged to Eric, parallel Andrew's decision to kidnap Delia?
13. Elise tells Delia, "If you had grown up with me, this is one of the things I would have tried to teach you: marry a man who loves you more than you love him. Because I have done both now, and when it is the other way around, there is no spell in the world that can even out the balance." Discuss this in terms of Delia's relationships with both Eric and Fitz. Which man do you think Delia should be with, and why?

14. Both Delia and Sophie quickly develop a close relationship with Ruthann. When Ruthann commits suicide, Delia is there to witness it. Why does she not try to stop Ruthann? What does Delia come to realize about herself from this experience?
15. Many of the chapters told from Andrew's point of view occur while he is in prison, "where everyone reinvents himself." What do these scenes, which depict in graphic detail the harsh realities of life behind bars, reveal about Andrew? What do they add to the overall storyline?
16. Right versus wrong is a dominant theme in *Vanishing Acts*— whether Andrew was right or wrong to kidnap Delia, whether Eric is right or wrong to hide his continued drinking from Delia, whether Delia is right or wrong not to stop Ruthann. How do the multiple perspectives in the story blur these lines and show how two people can view the same situation completely different? Were there any instances you changed your mind about something in the story after reading a different character's viewpoint?
17. Fitz tells Delia, "I think you're angry at yourself, for not being smart enough to figure this out all on your own... If you don't want someone to change your life for you again, Dee, you've got to change it yourself." How do Fitz's words make Delia see her circumstances differently?
18. In what way does Delia's romantic relationship with Fitz, while engaged to Eric, parallel Andrew's decision to kidnap Delia?
19. Ruthann introduces Delia to the Hopi creation myth, which suggests that humans have outgrown the world four times already, and are about to inhabit a fifth. Do most people outgrow their origins? Is reinvention part

of the human experience? How do each of the characters actions support or disprove this?

20. At one point, we learn that Fitz has not been writing about Andrew's trial, but about Delia. In fact, when he reads the first few pages to her, we can recognize them as the first few pages of this book. How does this affect the story you read? Is Fitz a reliable narrator?
21. Much is made of the nature of memory – whether it is stored physically, whether it can be conjured at will, whether it can be organically triggered or planted. Ultimately, do you believe Delia's recovered memories at the end of the book? Why or why not?
22. Delia says on page 151: "Sometimes knowing what's right isn't a rational decision, or even what works on paper. Sometimes leaving is the best course of action after all." Do you agree or disagree? Is doing the wrong thing EVER the right thing? Are there are ever circumstances that justify breaking the law?
23. How are each of the main characters— Delia, Fitz, Eric, Andrew, and Elise— most changed by the events that take place? Where do you envision the characters five years from now?