

Straight to Hell

by John Wesley Wilson

Book Club Discussion Guide

Questions for Reflection and Conversation

How to Use This Guide

These questions are intended for individual reflection, therapy settings, classrooms, or book clubs. You do not need to answer them all. Some may resonate immediately; others may feel distant or uncomfortable. Sit with the ones that stay with you.

There are no right answers—only honest ones.

Identity and Early Messages

1. The author grows up absorbing messages about worth, safety, and belonging long before he has the language to question them.

What messages about yourself did you learn early in life?

How have they shaped the way you see yourself today?

2. As a child, he learns to scan rooms, manage emotions, and anticipate danger.

What survival strategies did you develop growing up?

Are they still serving you, or are they now limiting you?

3. The memoir explores the gap between the self we perform and the self we experience internally.

Where in your life do you feel most authentic?
Where do you feel yourself performing?

Shame, Silence, and Secrecy

4. Shame thrives in silence throughout the author's early life.
What topics were unspoken or forbidden in your family or community?
How did that silence affect you?
 5. The author describes learning to "disappear" in order to remain safe and loved.
In what ways have you learned to hide parts of yourself?
What did that hiding protect you from?
 6. What is the difference, in your experience, between privacy and secrecy?
-

Faith, Belief, and Truth

7. The memoir traces a lifelong tension between inherited belief and lived experience.
Have you ever held a belief that no longer matched your reality?
What did it cost to keep it? What did it cost to question it?
 8. The author distinguishes between institutional faith and personal spirituality.
How do you define faith today?
Has that definition changed over time?
 9. What role has certainty played in your life?
What role has doubt played?
-

Love, Obligation, and Roles

10. The author enters marriage trying to fulfill a role he believes will make him acceptable.

Have you ever taken on a role in order to be loved or approved of?
What did it give you? What did it take from you?

11. The memoir portrays two people trying, in good faith, to build a life that ultimately could not hold.

What does it mean to honor the effort of a relationship even when it ends?

12. How do you distinguish between commitment, duty, and authentic love?

Grief and Complicated Loss

13. Terry's death becomes a turning point that reverberates across decades.

How has grief shaped your understanding of yourself or your beliefs?

14. The author carries guilt for years about what he believes he should have done differently.

What is the difference between responsibility and survivor's guilt?

15. How do you make meaning from loss without reducing it to a lesson?

Family, Forgiveness, and Boundaries

16. The memoir presents forgiveness not as reconciliation but as release.

What does forgiveness mean to you?

Is it possible without renewed closeness?

17. The author and his former spouse reach a place of mutual respect without returning to intimacy.

What does a healed relationship look like when it cannot be restored?

18. How do you balance compassion for others with compassion for yourself?

Authenticity and the Cost of Truth

19. Telling the truth results in both loss and freedom.
What truths in your life have felt risky to name?
 20. What is the cost of living inauthentically?
What is the cost of living truthfully?
 21. Have you experienced a moment when telling the truth changed your life trajectory?
-

Trauma and the Body

22. Early experiences continue to live in the body long after the events themselves.
Where do you notice your history showing up physically?
 23. What helps your body feel safe?
 24. How do you recognize the difference between present danger and remembered danger?
-

Healing and Reauthoring a Life

25. The author's path from pastor to psychologist reflects a reworking of earlier meaning systems.
Has your pain shaped your vocation or purpose?
 26. What does healing mean to you?
Is it an endpoint, a process, or something else?
 27. What parts of your past do you still feel defined by?
Which parts have you reclaimed?
-

Home, Belonging, and Chosen Family

28. The memoir reframes “home” as something built through truth rather than roles.
What makes a place—or a relationship—feel like home?
29. How has your definition of family changed over time?
30. What does unconditional love look like in practice?
-

The Sacred in Ordinary Life

31. Meaning is found not in doctrine but in connection and presence.
Where do you experience meaning in everyday life?
32. What practices help you feel grounded?
33. What does it mean to live without masks?
-

Integration and Moving Forward

34. The author ultimately stops defining himself by roles and claims a simpler identity: himself.
What labels have shaped you?
Which do you want to keep? Which do you want to release?
35. What does self-acceptance look like in your life right now?
36. If you were to write a final chapter of your own story today, what would it say?
-

For Groups

If you are reading this book with others:

- Which part of the memoir felt most familiar?
 - Which part challenged you the most?
 - Where did you notice yourself feeling defensive? Why?
 - What conversations did this book make possible that might not have happened otherwise?
-

Closing Reflection

The journey described in this memoir is not about arriving at certainty but about learning to live honestly.

Consider writing a brief response to the following:

- What does living truthfully mean to you now?
 - What would it look like to move one step closer to that life?
-

Resources for Support

Mental Health Support

If you are in immediate emotional distress or thinking about harming yourself, please contact:

United States

Call or text **988** — **Suicide & Crisis Lifeline**

Available 24 hours a day

If you are outside the U.S., please contact your country's local crisis service or emergency number.

For ongoing mental health support, consider working with a licensed therapist. Modalities that may be especially helpful include:

- Trauma-informed psychotherapy
- EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing)
- Somatic therapies
- Internal Family Systems (IFS)
- Attachment-focused therapy

Religious Trauma & Faith Deconstruction

- Religious Trauma Institute — www.religioustraumainstitute.com
- Recovering from Religion — www.recoveringfromreligion.org
- The Reclamation Collective — www.reclamationcollective.com

LGBTQ+ Support

- The Trevor Project — www.thetrevorproject.org

- PFLAG — www.pflag.org
- GLAAD — www.glaad.org

Local LGBTQ+ community centers can also provide in-person support.

Grief and Loss

- GriefShare — www.griefshare.org
 - The Dougy Center — www.dougy.org
 - Modern Loss — www.modernloss.com
-

For Survivors of Childhood Trauma

- Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline — 1-800-4-A-CHILD (1-800-422-4453)
 - RAINN — www.rainn.org
-

Finding a Therapist

- Psychology Today — www.psychologytoday.com
- TherapyDen — www.therapyden.com
- Inclusive Therapists — www.inclusivetherapists.com

Look for clinicians experienced in:

- Trauma
 - Identity development
 - Religious trauma
 - LGBTQ+ affirming care
 - Grief and loss
-

Working With the Author

Dr. John Wesley Wilson is a licensed clinical psychologist providing telehealth psychotherapy to adults across PSYPACT-participating states, which currently includes 42 states.

His clinical work focuses on:

- Trauma and complex trauma
- Religious trauma and faith transitions
- Identity development
- Grief and life transitions
- Depression and Anxiety disorders

Website: www.doctorjohnwilson.com

Email: johnwwilsonpsyd@gmail.com

IMPORTANT: Reading this book does not establish a therapeutic relationship. If you are in crisis, please contact 988 or your local emergency services.
