

**Book Club Questions for  
Signal Fires by Dani Shapiro**

1. How would Sarah and Theo's lives have been different if she had told the truth about the circumstances of the car wreck? What personality traits were revealed in Sarah and Theo during the novel's opening scene? How did these traits shape the outcomes of their lives?
2. How does the novel's oscillating timeline reflect the human experience of looking back on the past and making hopeful predictions about the future? What was it like to learn about the characters through moments that weren't linear? What cultural shifts were captured in those five decades? What remained the same throughout the years?
3. Ben's profession puts him at the center of moments of life and death. Sarah's career is anchored in storytelling, while Theo masters the art of preparing "comfort food with staying power." (207) How do these professions reflect essential aspects of Ben and his children?
4. The author writes lovingly of the Wilf house on Division Street. What can we discern about the Wilfs by observing their possessions, particularly when Sarah arrives to find the artifacts in a state of disorder? What is the significance of the fact that Theo spent many years estranged from the concept of home? What do the artifacts in your house indicate about the places you have called home?
5. Lost together, what makes Waldo and Mimi ideal companions during those dark hours? How does the experience distill what matters most to them, and to the family members who are searching for them?
6. As a young adult, Waldo invokes quantum physics to explain the mystical interconnectedness of all things (including humanity). To what extent is his connection to Ben determined by fate, versus the effort they make to sustain a bond over the years? Why is Waldo's interest in the heavens so difficult for Shenkman to appreciate? What is Alice's most enduring legacy for her son?
7. The novel explores the impact of silence and unspoken truths. How does the silence surrounding the car accident involving Sara, Theo, and their friend affect each character's life? How does this silence shape their relationships with one another and themselves?
8. Waldo Shenkman is portrayed as a unique and intellectually gifted child. How does his passion for the stars and his deep understanding of the universe help him cope with the challenges he faces within his family and society?

9. The title, "Signal Fires," implies a sense of guidance or a call for help. How do the characters in the story act as signal fires for one another, providing support, solace, or direction in times of darkness or confusion?
10. On page 128, Sarah thinks of lives as books divided into chapters, and she thinks about Peter's observation that second acts in screenplays should always have two major plot points. What are the major plot points and chapters of your life? Who do you consider to be the author of your life story?
11. Sarah lives in perpetual fear that Peter will find out about her infidelity. What is at the root of her masochism—experience in which she is abused and shamed? Why isn't she able to feel satisfied with Peter, "a simple guy, a nice guy who hasn't been able to catch a break"? (page 131) How do the characters in Signal Fires contend with guilt, even if the guilt is unwarranted?
12. Theo loves being an uncle to Syd and Livvie. As the girls approach the cusp of adulthood, the same age when he was reeling from tragedy, how is he able to make peace with the fact that it's impossible to predict what lies ahead?
13. In the final portraits of Shenkman and Ben, we see two aging men from the same neighborhood choose two very separate retirement paths. Shenkman lives in isolation in Florida. Ben enjoys the companionship of family on the west coast. What accounts for these different outcomes? How do their pandemic experiences compare to yours?
14. The novel's epigraph, from Carolyn Forché's poem "Mourning," calls for lighting signal fires "wherever you find yourselves." Who lights the signal fires in the novel? Who heeds them and takes action?
15. What are the fundamental reasons for Ben and Mimi's happiness in marriage, and for the sadness and frustration in the Shenkmans' marriage? What is the effect of the novel's closing line regarding the Wilfs, "You would hope that they know how lucky they are, how blessed"?
16. How does Waldo's love for astrophysics and his fascination with the stars serve as a metaphor for his search for connection and understanding in the world?
17. Both the Wilf and Shenkman families experience profound tragedies. How does their grief manifest differently, and how do these experiences shape their characters and interactions throughout the story?

18. One of the characters, Sara Wilf, becomes a star, quite literally, in her career. How does her rise to fame impact her relationships with her family, especially her brother Theo, and what does it symbolize in the larger context of the narrative?
19. Discuss the portraits of parenting that are offered in the novel. What aspects of motherhood and fatherhood resonated with you? Do the children do a good job of becoming caregivers to their own parents later in life?
20. Family secrets have played a key role in many of Dani Shapiro's books. How does *Signal Fires* further expand upon the theme of unspoken truths and hidden turning points in her other novels and memoirs that you have read?