

# **All I Ever Did Was Love a Man**

## **Thoughts to Ponder**

*These are general questions for discussion during book clubs, dinner discussions, church groups and other venues including just talking to your friends. You may choose to limit the number or questions that you discuss or schedule a series of discussions. This novel is an excellent opportunity to discuss love, life, relationships, religion, personal health and social stigmas and policy and lends itself to serious dialogue. We welcome you emailing any specific discussion questions or “thoughts to ponder” for considered inclusion into this reading guide: [sdao@allieverdidwasloveaman.com](mailto:sdao@allieverdidwasloveaman.com).*

1. One of the main themes of the book is that of love—love of man, family, friends and self, what are the greatest examples of demonstrated love in the novel and why?
  - a. Are there any unexpected examples of love that are demonstrated?
  - b. Are the expressions of love realistic?
2. Who is your favorite character in the novel and why?
  - a. What did the character teach you or reveal to you about yourself, life, family or your circle of friends?
  - b. What are the parallels between you and your favorite character?
3. What were your initial impressions about Sabrena, do they persist throughout the novel?
  - a. If there is a change in your impression, when did it come for you?
  - b. What are Sabrena’s greatest strengths?
  - c. What are Sabrena’s greatest weaknesses?
  - d. Is she a heroine or a victim?
4. Describe the relationship between Sabrena and Steve; is this “true love”, “destiny”, “the love of a lifetime”, “soul mates” or something else?
5. What is the most romantic scene of the novel and why?
  - a. Is the greatest “love story” Sabrena and Steve, Rachel and Barry, Dr. Scott and her husband, Gerald and his wife, Vivian and her husband or another couple?
  - b. What lessons can be learned about romance vs. love—are they the same or fundamentally different?
6. What types of men are portrayed in the novel? Is this an accurate portrayal or bias toward a particular type?
  - a. Is Steve a hero or a villain?
  - b. What is your perspective of Carlton?
  - c. How about the role of Vance and the friendship with Sabrena?
  - d. What are your perceptions about the other men in the novel and their role in Sabrena’s life or that of her family/friends; Francis, Barry, Gerald, Sabrena’s father, Dr. Grier, etc...?
7. One of the central characters in the novel is Rachel, what did she show you about love?
  - a. The love of her friend (Sabrena)
  - b. The love of a man (Barry)
  - c. The love of herself and her path to love
8. Sabrena had to deal with a diagnosis of HIV/AIDS in the midst of her regular life challenges (i.e. single mom, breakup, financial stressors, self-esteem issues, etc...). Did she deal with her diagnosis properly? What would you have done differently? Discuss her struggles with treatment and her mental health as well as physical health.
  - a. Discuss the affect and response to the diagnosis both as read in the novel, but also through your own interpretation of the characters:
    - i. Rachel
    - ii. Steve
    - iii. Sabrena’s daughters
    - iv. Sabrena’s family

9. Do you feel more sympathetic towards Sabrena vs. Vance? If so, why?
  - a. Is your empathy and concern regarding persons with HIV/AIDS dependent upon how the person becomes infected?
10. How do you interpret Dr. Scott's treatment and interactions with Sabrena? (What have been your interactions with the medical community, consider the other healthcare professionals that were introduced and how they treated Sabrena when pondering this.)
  - a. Whether it is HIV/AIDS, hypertension, diabetes, cancer or other health issues—how do you think that the patient/doctor relationship should manifest itself?
  - b. What about your role in the relationship, are you empowered to ask questions, seek more information and be an active participant? Who's responsible for your health and your treatment?
11. How do you feel about Sabrena's daughters and their relationship?
  - a. Did Sabrena make good decisions about her daughters' welfare?
  - b. Were they the primary focus of Sabrena's love or was it the love a man?
  - c. When should she have told them about her diagnosis and how would you have talked with them if you were Sabrena? How much should they have been told?
  - d. What happens if Renee and Deena's friends or their families find out about their mother's diagnosis? Will this affect how they interact with their friends—the sleepovers play dates, teacher's interactions, Sunday School, etc....
12. There are several "social landmines" that are explored in this novel. Describe your reaction to and the perceived reality of the issues below and how they speak to the broader issues of our society :
  - a. The church's response to Vance's illness and HIV/AIDS in general ( see page 233)
    - i. Would the response have been different if Vance wasn't homosexual? What if he was dying of leukemia or another illness—is the response different? What about his father's response and their relationship?
  - b. The response of Leigh (Sabrena's coworker) and others to HIV/AIDS (see page 235)
  - c. The "class" differences that are addressed in this novel:
    - i. Barry and his "blue collar" vs. "white collar" job and the relationship with Rachel
    - ii. Valerie and the façade of her life
  - d. Fatherhood and the various examples of both biological and functional (i.e. "step", older brother, etc...).
13. Discuss the role of spirituality and religious practices that are explored in this novel from the perspective of Sabrena. What role did her diagnosis play in her spirituality?
  - a. Was Ms. Bernadette appropriate in praying with Sabrena or was this unprofessional? What about Dr. Scott and her private prayers for Sabrena and the confession of her faith to her?
  - b. Sabrena initially questions God as to what horrible thing she had done to deserve HIV/AIDS. She feels dirty/unclean and feels that He is punishing her or has cursed her. How do you respond to these feelings, what would you say to her?
  - c. Explore other examples of spirituality or religious practices in the novel.
14. After having read the novel, has your perception of HIV/AIDS and those infected changed?
  - a. What reactions were shocking or unexpected in the novel?
  - b. What has been your experience with HIV/AIDS? Have your views changed and how?
15. The title for the novel comes from a conversation between Dr. Scott and Sabrena. Sabrena says, "Dr. Scott—you know, all I ever did—all I ever did was love a man." What does that comment and the entire exchange mean to you and how did it change from your introduction to the novel vs. at the completion of the novel?

### **Specific Health Questions**

We hope that you fully read the last part of the book (page 251 to the end) which contains vital health information. However, by reading only the fiction portion of the novel—you've learned a lot about HIV/AIDS just by walking with Sabrena through her life. Let's explore the health aspects in more depth.

1. How did this novel increase your knowledge of HIV/AIDS as it relates to the following:
  - a. Who is at risk for HIV/AIDS and the “face” of HIV/AIDS
  - b. Timeline from exposure to HIV to infection and AIDS
  - c. A negative test, repeated testing and subsequent positive test
  - d. Symptoms prior to diagnosis and during Sabrena's subsequent visits
  - e. Treatment both medications and the healthcare professionals' role
  - f. Terms, different conditions/diseases and how they are related to HIV/AIDS
  - g. The specific risks of HIV/AIDS in all women including single/ divorced/married, heterosexual, non-drug users, not a prostitute and limited sexual partners.
  - h. Sexual activity even with the diagnosis of HIV/AIDS was explored in the novel. Sabrena's doctors talked to her about her sexuality, her desires and passions—discuss this aspect from a health perspective and was this surprising to you?
2. Did you learn more about interacting with your healthcare professional and feel empowered to discuss your health issues in any manner? Did the novel give you tools that you could use?
3. As a result of reading the novel, including the health information at the end of the book, are you more aware of your risk for HIV/AIDS? Will you or have you been tested for HIV/AIDS? Will you encourage your friends and family to be tested? How can this be used in all age groups in your community?
4. The main character planned for her life but also her possible death through her job with benefit analysis, her lawyer with a living will and planning for her children. Did her actions enlighten you about a living will, estate planning, hospice and end-of-life decisions? How can these be utilized in your life or the lives of those you love?
5. One of the issues that was consistent in Sabrena's treatment was that of cost of healthcare. Sabrena had medical insurance but was keenly aware of the increased co-pays for medications and her physician visits. Although she had insurance, this still took a financial toll on her family budget and the choices that she had to make. What is your working knowledge of your health plan, life insurance, disability insurance/coverage and what steps will you take as a result of reading this novel?