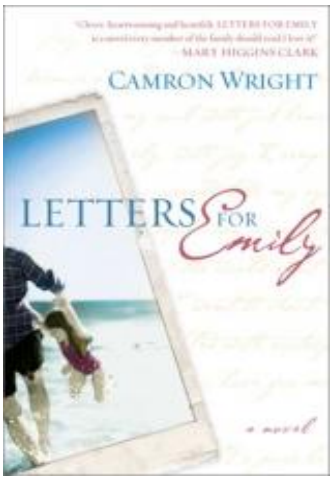
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

Letters for Emily

by Camron Wright



About the Book

Harry Whitney is dying. And in the process, he's losing his mind. Afflicted with Alzheimer's disease, he knows his "good" time is dwindling. Wishing to be remembered as more than an ailing old man, Harry realizes the greatest gift he can pass on is the wisdom of his years, the jumbled mix of experiences and emotions that add up to a life. And so he compiles a book of his poems for his favorite granddaughter, Emily, in the hope that his words might somehow heal the tenuous relationships in a family that is falling apart.

But Harry's poems contain much more than meets the eye....As Emily and her family discover, intricate messages are hidden in them, clues and riddles that lead to an extraordinary cache of letters, and even a promise of hidden gold. Are they the ramblings of a man losing touch with reality? Or has Harry given them a gift more valuable than any of them could have guessed? As Harry's secrets are uncovered one by one, his family learns about romance, compassion, and hope -- and together they set out to search for something priceless, a shining prize to treasure forever. They may grow closer in spirit or be torn apart by greed...but their lives will be undeniably altered by Harry's words in his letters for Emily.

Discussion Guide

1. What is Harry's motivation for writing and collecting the letters and poems? Why does he address the letters to Emily rather than to one of his own children? Why do you think he chooses to use the poems to hide passwords instead of just compiling the letters in a scrapbook?

2. The reader comes to know Harry in the first few chapters of the novel and then through his writings, and even after this death he remains a central character in the story. What was your initial perception of Harry? Did your opinion change as the story progressed?

3. Through reading Harry's book of poems and letters, Bob and Michelle come to learn about their mother, as well as about their parents' courtship and marriage. Why did Harry not tell them about their mother when they were growing up?

4. Bob has a contentious relationship with Harry, believing that Harry was not a good father and even referring to him by his first name. After Bob has read a portion of the letters and poems, Laura says to him, "'I think you're starting to understand the old man, and that bothers you'" (pg. 168). Why does this bother him? How do Bob's feelings about his father change as he discovers more about him?

5. When the novel opens, Bob and Laura's marriage is dissolving. How does their relationship change as the story progresses? What role does Harry play in their relationship both before and after his death?

6. Laura questions the cause of Harry's death, even wondering if a person can will himself to die and then delving into his medical history. What drives her to pursue this quest?

7. In one letter Harry writes, "Parents are strange and wonderful creatures....They are just people struggling to do the best they can, just the same as you are. You will feel let down, betrayed, even ashamed. This is the time, Emily, when you need to forgive your parents for being human" (pg. 165). The letter is addressed to Emily, but how does this reflect Harry's relationship with his own children and with Bob in particular?

8. Harry's book affects each of the characters that read it. How does each character change from having read Harry's writings? Which of the letters did you find the most compelling, and why?

9. In the Afterword, Camron Wright speaks of being inspired by the writings of his grandfather, Harry Wright, and makes the following statement: "I would encourage the reader to seek out the writings and letters of his or her own parents, grandparents, or other loved ones. Perhaps, in this search, hidden wisdom will be discovered as well. It may be, in reading forgotten words, in remembering their lives, their sacrifices, that their frailties will wash away, their strengths will surface, and they will be remembered fondly. It is a wish that everyone should be granted." What does he mean by this last sentence? How does this sentiment play out in **Letters for Emily**?

10. Do you have any letters, poems, or other writings from your own relatives? If so, how have they changed or inspired you?

11. What did you learn or gain from reading **Letters for Emily**?

Author Bio

Camron Wright attended Brigham Young University and received a B.A. in business management. **Letters For Emily**, his first novel, was inspired by the writings of his grandfather, who passed away in 1996. He lives with his wife and their four children in a small town near Salt Lake City.

Critical Praise

"Love, compassion, and forgiveness find a home in *Letters For Emily*."

Letters for Emily

by Camron Wright

Publication Date: January 1, 2002
Hardcover: 224 pages
Publisher: Atria
ISBN-10: 0743444469
ISBN-13: 9780743444460