

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR ESME CAHILL FAILS SPECTACULARLY
(ALERT: SOME QUESTIONS MAY CONTAIN SPOILERS!)

1. Esme says that her life in Asheville, her hometown, started to “feel like suffocation.” Discuss the pros and cons of living where you grew up. Did you leave? Did you stay? Why or why not?
2. Discuss Esme’s relationship with her mother, Robyn, and why you might or might not feel Esme was too hard on her mother—both when she was growing up and in the present setting of the novel.
3. Esme’s dream is to become a published author. Is there ever a time to set aside dreams such as these?
4. Although Adele has passed away before the novel begins, her story is just as important to the narrative as Esme’s. Discuss the ways Adele’s actions in the past influenced the actions of Esme and the rest of her family in the present.
5. Esme didn’t realize it as a child, but she and Adele shared a similar youthful ambition: to make a living as a professional artist. Though there were practical considerations behind each woman’s choice to modify their ambitions, those weren’t the only things that stood in their way. Discuss the role that fear and the need for approval played in squashing Esme’s and Adele’s creativity and how they eventually managed to push through it to become more fully in touch with their artistic sensibilities.
6. Were you surprised at Dawes’s reasons for abandoning Esme when she needed him most? Do you feel he deserves to be forgiven? Why or why not?
7. Recipes that are handed down are part of this novel. Are there recipes you’ve received from family members or friends that are special to you?
8. Adele has synesthesia. Have you ever met anyone with synesthesia? Can you imagine what it would feel like to have it?
9. As a teenager, Esme dreamed of being famous and coming home in triumph, bearing gifts for her grandparents. After returning home as an adult, humbled to the point of feeling like she’s failed at everything, Esme is eventually able to give Adele and George other gifts, immaterial in nature, that are far more valuable. What are those gifts? What did the act of giving them teach Esme about her grandparents, and herself?

10. Were you surprised Esme makes the choices she does at the end of the novel? Does she end up doing the right thing for herself?
11. Discuss the role of family—the family you make and the family you create—during the course of the novel.
12. Esme is a planner. The young Adele was too. But she eventually came to believe that, “life has a way of steering you toward the path you’re meant to take, whether you meant to take it or not.” Do you agree? What detours have you encountered in your lifetime? How did they help shape the person you are today?