



Discussion Questions: *Sweet Sorrow*
“Words, Words, Words” Book Club—June 2021

1. What are your first impressions of the novel? Were there any passages that stuck out to you?
2. What does this novel have to say about the transformative power of art? Did it remind you of any formative experiences you had with Shakespeare or theater in general? Did you see yourself reflected in any members of the Full Fathom Five Collective?
3. Why do you think Nicholls chose *Romeo and Juliet* as the “backdrop” play for this story? What common elements or themes do the two stories share? What is the core obstacle for the protagonists in each story?
4. On page 165, Charlie says, “the greatest lie that age tells you about youth is that it’s somehow free of care, worry or fear. Good God, doesn’t anyone remember?” What kind of portrait does this novel paint of adolescence? Why do you think the coming-of-age narrative is so universally popular?
5. What kinds of love are depicted in the novel? Were there any scenes that stuck out to you as accurate or moving portrayals? How does the book’s view of love evolve as we see the characters grow? How would you say that love, especially first-love, ultimately comes to be defined?
6. What did you think about the sub-plot of Charlie’s stealing from the petrol station? How do you think Fran would have responded if he had told her? Do you think that Charlie would have stopped on his own if he had not been caught?
7. How did you feel about the way Charlie’s father’s struggle with depression and substance abuse was portrayed? In an interview, David Nicholls said he tried to be franker about mental health than any of the characters in the book could be with each other. How has the conversation surrounding this issue has changed since 1997?
8. How does the novel address gender norms and, specifically, masculinity? What did you think of Charlie’s relationship with his high school friends (Harper, Fox, and Lloyd) and his father? As the novel progresses, what does he notice about these relationships? Has the cultural understanding of masculinity evolved in the past two decades?
9. Why do you think Nicholls made the choice to have Charlie looking back on this time in his life, rather than living it in real time? Do you see him as a reliable narrator? What does the book reveal about the dual themes of nostalgia and memory? If there is a time in your life that you feel particularly nostalgic about, why do you think these memories are so enduring?
10. Charlie says he and Fran broke up “with a banality no one would ever bother to dramatize.” How did you feel about this choice? Were you surprised by their eventual reunion?