

**Reading Group Guide for  
*We Hope for Better Things*  
by Erin Bartels**

(Spoiler alert—these questions assume you've already read the book)

1. Though they live in different eras, Elizabeth, Nora, and Mary encounter many of the same problems and must make hard choices. When faced with problems in your own life, to whom do you turn for guidance? To whom did Elizabeth, Nora, and Mary turn? How did it work out?
2. In several scenes, people are invited into one another's homes. Elizabeth at Nora's home. Fugitive slaves in Mary's. Young Nora at William's home in Detroit. William at Nora's parents' house. Who shows genuine hospitality? Who do you welcome into your home? When have you found it difficult to show hospitality to someone?
3. Religious belief and religious people in this story are complicated. For instance, Rev. Whittaker applauds Mary for her abolitionist beliefs, and indeed the abolitionists movement had strong roots in Christian faith communities, but he would prefer that blacks and whites worship separately. How has the church failed in its response to racism and inequality? Where has it succeeded?
4. A common and problematic motif in literature and film that deals with racial inequality is that of the White Savior. Which characters in this story might see themselves in that role, whether intentionally or unintentionally? What are things they could have done differently in order to avoid placing themselves in that role? What scenes did black characters resist that dynamic? How did they show agency over their own lives and futures?
5. In this story, both white and black characters show that they have prejudices and fears when it comes to the other race. How are these prejudices and fears developed? Which seem legitimate to you? Why?
6. During the story the question is asked whether the events of our lives and indeed of history are all just random and chaotic or if there is some overarching plan being worked out. What are your beliefs on this? How do these beliefs affect the way you live your everyday life?
7. To what extent do you think people are the products of their times when it comes to racism? Does that have any effect on their culpability for perpetuating injustice? In other words, do right and wrong beliefs and/or behavior change as the culture changes? Or are some things constant? Why?