

WOODWARD BOOKS PRESENTS

The Holding

a novel by J. M. Woodward



BOOK CLUB KIT

DISCUSSION GUIDE · HOST NOTES · PAIRINGS · SHAREABLES

“Maybe we were sent here like you said. Parts of us. From two different places, into the same family, to learn to love each other across the kind of difference that we are.”

COMING OCTOBER 1, 2026

How to use this kit

Everything a host needs for one warm, unhurried evening.

This kit has two clearly separated halves so it can do double duty.

Part One is spoiler-free. Share it freely — with prospective members, a librarian, or the group chat — to help a club decide to read the book and to prepare before the meeting. Nothing in it gives away a single turn of the story.

Part Two is the full-spoiler discussion guide. It assumes everyone has finished the book, and it names the ending. Don't open it until your meeting.

The discussion questions are grouped by *lens* — craft, family, Simon's mind, screens & cruelty, grief — so a host can choose a path that suits the room. You will not get through them all in one sitting, and you're not meant to. Pick six or eight that spark you.

The practical details

LENGTH	~78,000 words · 355 pages. A comfortable one-month pick and a single-meeting discussion.
STRUCTURE	17 chapters plus an epilogue, rotating among four points of view — Simon, Anna, and the cats Auggie and Gracie — with occasional cosmic interludes.
SETTING	Present-day central-southern Ontario, Canada — two households, a school, a horse barn.
MEETING	Plan for 60–90 minutes of discussion; there is easily that much here.
FORMATS	Paperback, hardcover, and ebook — October 2026.

Invite the writer to your meeting

J. M. Woodward is a Southern Ontario writer and is glad to join book-club discussions by video for a Q&A — about the story, the four-narrator structure, the horse world, and the book's unusual, openly disclosed writing process. Reach out to ask about a visit: contact@jmwoodwardbooks.com

For choosing the book

Share this page freely. It gives nothing away.

The one-line hook

A coming-of-age literary novel, told with a touch of magic-realism, about two siblings and the distance between them — which seems ordinary, and isn't. A careful, character-driven story about the everyday work of finding, and holding on to, each other.

What it's about

Simon is nine. He moves through the world as an outgoing creature of the moment — heart on his sleeve, sometimes too loud, sometimes too much. Anna is thirteen: guarded, watchful, sharper than she lets people see, and quietly drowning in the social blood-sport of grade eight. Time is not on their side; the love they do not share can only be made in the young, and they are growing up-and-out of their smallness.

Unseen at the edges of the frame, something outside themselves is trying to bring them together. What they manage — or fail to manage — between themselves will register far past the small horizon of a Canadian childhood.

Why it works for a book club

- **It splits the room in the best way.** Is the cosmic story real, or something the two of them built out of their own longing? The book never settles it. Neither will your club.
- **Four narrators, four arguments.** Two siblings and two cats each see the same family through a different lens — a natural debate about who understands the most.
- **It's timely.** An AI-altered image and a group chat do real harm here. Clubs with parents, teachers, and teens will have plenty to say.
- **It rewards reading aloud.** The prose has a hypnotic, repetitive cadence built to be spoken. Ask a member to read a passage; watch the room lean in.
- **It puts its own making up for debate.** The writer is openly transparent about how the book was made: much of it was written the way books have always been written, and Claude served as his writing and thinking partner on the first drafts of many chapters — every character, structure, and choice his own. Whether, and how, that changes what a story is worth is a live question a club can argue in good faith.



Spoilers ahead



Everything past this point assumes your club has finished the book,
including the ending.

*If you haven't — close the kit here, and come back after the
last page.*

Questions for discussion

Grouped by lens. Pick the paths that fit your room — you won't need them all.

Warm-up

1. Before any analysis: what did the last thirty pages *do* to you? Where were you — and did you see the ending coming?
2. Whose voice did you trust most — Simon, Anna, Auggie, or Gracie — and whose did you come to love most? Were they the same narrator?

Lens 1 Four narrators & the craft of the telling

1. The novel is told by two children and two cats. What can a cat narrator show us about this family that the humans can't see — and what are the cats blind to?
2. Auggie calls it “the absence”; Gracie calls it “the otherness.” They describe the same thing in the children and never compare notes until they meet. What do you think it actually is — a soul, a capacity for love, a presence, something else?
3. The prose repeats itself on purpose — “The going-up did the going-up. The going-down did the going-down.” Did that rhythm work on you, or against you?
4. Whole chapters are given to feline diplomacy — hisses, stations, a duchess and a road-elder. Why give so much of a book about grief to comedy? What would be lost without it?
5. The book withholds the parents' interior voices for long stretches, then hands us Dad's and Mom's at key moments. How did that change what you felt about the adults, and the divorce underneath it all?

Lens 2 Siblings, parents & the two houses

1. Simon and Anna reconcile in stages — the shared headset, “be the silly” on camera, “see her in stillness” at the horse show. Which small crossing felt like the real turning point?
2. The children live between Mom's house and Dad's basement apartment. How does the book portray a divorced, blended family — a wound, a fact of life, or both?
3. Mom reads the note and “for a weak moment, wanted to make ashes of the whole goddamn world,” then goes downstairs. What did you make of the parents' restraint — the doors they choose not to open?
4. Anna loves Simon “in the way I love you and I hate that I told you.” Why is sibling love so much harder for her to say than to feel?

Lens 3 Simon's mind

The book renders Simon's inner life from the inside — the ook-ook, the rules, statue-mode, “on the outside a statue, on the inside a party” — but it never names a diagnosis, and never calls him neurodivergent. His way of being is simply allowed to speak for itself.

1. The novel never puts a label on Simon. What are the strengths of that choice — and what might its risks be? What do you think the writer was after?
2. Did the absence of a name change how you read him, compared with a book that states a diagnosis up front? Did you find yourself quietly supplying one anyway — and what does that impulse say?
3. How did living *inside* Simon's point of view — rather than watching from outside — change your sense of him? What did you understand that the other kids at school don't?
4. By the epilogue, Simon plays ordinary tag with Hudson and Lewis, and the ook has become a small clicking sound. Is that growth, adaptation, masking, or simply him at nine-and-a-half?
5. Anna is embarrassed by Simon and then fiercely protective of him. Without a label to lean on, what does the book suggest about how a family — and the world — comes to understand a child like him?

Lens 4 Screens, AI & cruelty

1. The turn hinges on an AI filter that makes Anna into “Alien Anna” — “unmistakably her and unmistakably not her at the same time.” Why is an AI-altered image more devastating here than an ordinary cruel photo?
2. Anna's most private, hopeful self — her note — is what gets weaponized. What is the book saying about the risk of being sincere in a world of group chats and screenshots?
3. Mae builds “her social currency on the leak,” and “the leak required a target who responded.” What finally defeats the cruelty is Anna *not* responding. Satisfying, or bleak?
4. Screens are villain and lifeline at once — the phone destroys Anna; the headset saves Simon; “Papa” texts wisdom from a mountain. Does the novel take a position on technology, or refuse to?
5. Papa tells Anna the truth about who you are “just gives you strength... they can be cruel about it, but they can't have it. It stays yours.” Do you believe that's true? Did the book earn it?

Lens 5 Grief, the cats & the title

1. The cats conclude that nothing ordinary can pull the children out of themselves — only grief for a loved thing going away. Old Auggie refuses the vet and chooses to die. How did you feel about a book that makes a cat's death the instrument of a family's healing?
2. Gracie warms the bay window and offers her best station to the dying road-elder. What did that act of grace between two rivals mean to you?
3. Auggie and the children “signed a contract” at the shelter with “a final paragraph, very small” that only the cat had read. What do you think that last paragraph said — and do you read Auggie's death as sacrifice, instinct, love, or the book's cosmic machinery?
4. The title lands in the final chapter: “She broke holding her brother. Simon broke against her... The two holdings were one holding.” How many kinds of holding does the book stack into that one word?
5. A new vantage opens late — an older family member, the house almost a presence. Did that add something, or pull focus? What could it reach that the four narrators couldn't?

The ending & the big questions

1. Was any of it real — Squanchia and Banannia, the senders, the window that was closing — or something the two of them built together out of longing and imagination, a shared story their subconscious needed to be true? Does the book want you to decide? Does it matter?
2. The epilogue ends at an airport, the siblings inside “an invisible small circle the two of them had drawn... without either of them having drawn it.” Is that a happy ending, a hopeful one, or a hard-won one?
3. If you had to hand this book to one person in your life, who would it be — and would you warn them about the cat, or let it come?
4. The book opens with the writer's note disclosing how it was made — written in the traditional way, with Claude as a writing and thinking partner on many first drafts. Did you read it before the novel or after — and how did it land? Did knowing change the way you read what followed?

Running the meeting

A simple, unhurried plan — about seventy-five minutes.

A 75-minute flow

- FIRST 10 MIN** Arrivals & the warm-up. Let everyone say where the ending left them before anyone analyzes anything.
- NEXT 45 MIN** Two or three lenses. Choose the ones that fit your group — don't try to cover all five.
- NEXT 15 MIN** The ending & big questions. Save “was any of it real?” for when the room is warm; it goes longest.
- LAST 5 MIN** The read-aloud send-off. Close by reading one short passage together.

Two icebreakers

- If a cat has been quietly cataloguing *your* household for nine years, what's the one thing it knows about you that no human does?
- Squanch and Banannie are the pet names two kids answer to at their dad's house. What's a name someone in your family only gets called by one specific person?

Passages worth reading aloud

- **The cats' first stand-off** — “You smell wrong.” / “I smell like my house.” (Ch. 16). Comic and disarming; good early in the night.
- **Papa's texts to Anna** — “it is yours. it stays yours.” (Ch. 15). The book's thesis on identity, in chat bubbles.
- **The final embrace** — “The two holdings were one holding.” (Ch. 17). Have a tissue ready; end here if you want the room quiet.

If discussion stalls

Go concrete: “*Which single scene would you keep if you could keep only one?*” or “*Who in this family do you most want to sit down with?*” Specific questions reliably reopen a quiet room better than big thematic ones.

Pairings & two easy recipes

Low-effort, make-ahead, and forgiving. Nobody should miss the discussion for the oven.

Banannia Banana Bread

One loaf · make the day before

Banannia demands it. The obvious pun, fully embraced.

- 3 very ripe bananas, mashed
 - 1/3 cup melted butter
 - 3/4 cup sugar
 - 1 egg, beaten · 1 tsp vanilla
 - 1 tsp baking soda · pinch of salt
 - 1½ cups flour
1. Heat oven to 350°F. Butter a loaf pan.
 2. Stir butter into the mashed bananas. Mix in sugar, egg, vanilla.
 3. Sprinkle soda and salt over; stir in flour just until combined.
 4. Pour in; bake 50–55 min, until a knife comes out clean. Cool before slicing.

Duchess & Road-Elder Cat Cookies

About two dozen · one dough, two cats

For Gracie and Auggie. Ice one batch proud, one batch humble.

- 1 cup butter, softened
 - 2/3 cup sugar
 - 1 tsp vanilla
 - 2 cups flour · pinch of salt
 - *To finish:* a little icing sugar + milk
1. Cream butter and sugar; beat in vanilla. Work in flour and salt to a smooth dough.
 2. Chill 30 min. Roll ¼" thick; cut cat shapes (a simple sitting-cat cutter, or trace one).
 3. Bake at 325°F for 12–15 min, until just set — not browned.
 4. Cool, then dab on thin icing. One duchess, one road-elder.

More pairings (no baking required)

Butter tarts or Nanaimo bars. A nod to the book's central-Ontario table.

Horse-show snacks. Carrots & dip, apple slices, trail mix — barn-day food for Anna's ribbons.

Warm drinks in the bay window. Tea in the sunniest seat in the house — the warmest station — for the ending.

Plantain or banana chips. If the loaf is too much, the salty-sweet shortcut.

Recipes adapted from classic, traditional home formulas for banana bread and butter shortbread — long-standing everyday recipes in the public domain, lightly reworded and themed for this kit.

K E E P S A K E

Notes & favourite passages

For the lines you want to remember, and what the room said back.



Shareable blurbs

Copy-and-paste, spoiler-free, for members recommending the pick.

Short — for a group chat or story

Our next pick: **THE HOLDING**. Two siblings, two cats, and a quiet cosmic bargain nobody quite believes in. Funny, strange, and then it wrecks you. Bring tissues.

Medium — for a post or newsletter

THE HOLDING is an upmarket literary novel narrated by two feuding siblings — and their two watchful cats. A voice in a boy's VR headset says he and his sister were brought together to grow a love while there's still time. His sister half-believes. Tender, funny, devastating.

Star-rating caption

★★★★★ — I did not expect a book with a cat narrator to leave me in pieces. **THE HOLDING** is about siblings, screens, grief, and the everyday work of holding on to each other. Read it; then call your brother.

Three hashtags to seed

#TheHolding #BookClubPick
#LiteraryFiction

Where to point people

Book, formats & pre-order:
jmwoodwardbooks.com



*Thank you for reading — and for holding on to
each other.*

THE HOLDING

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