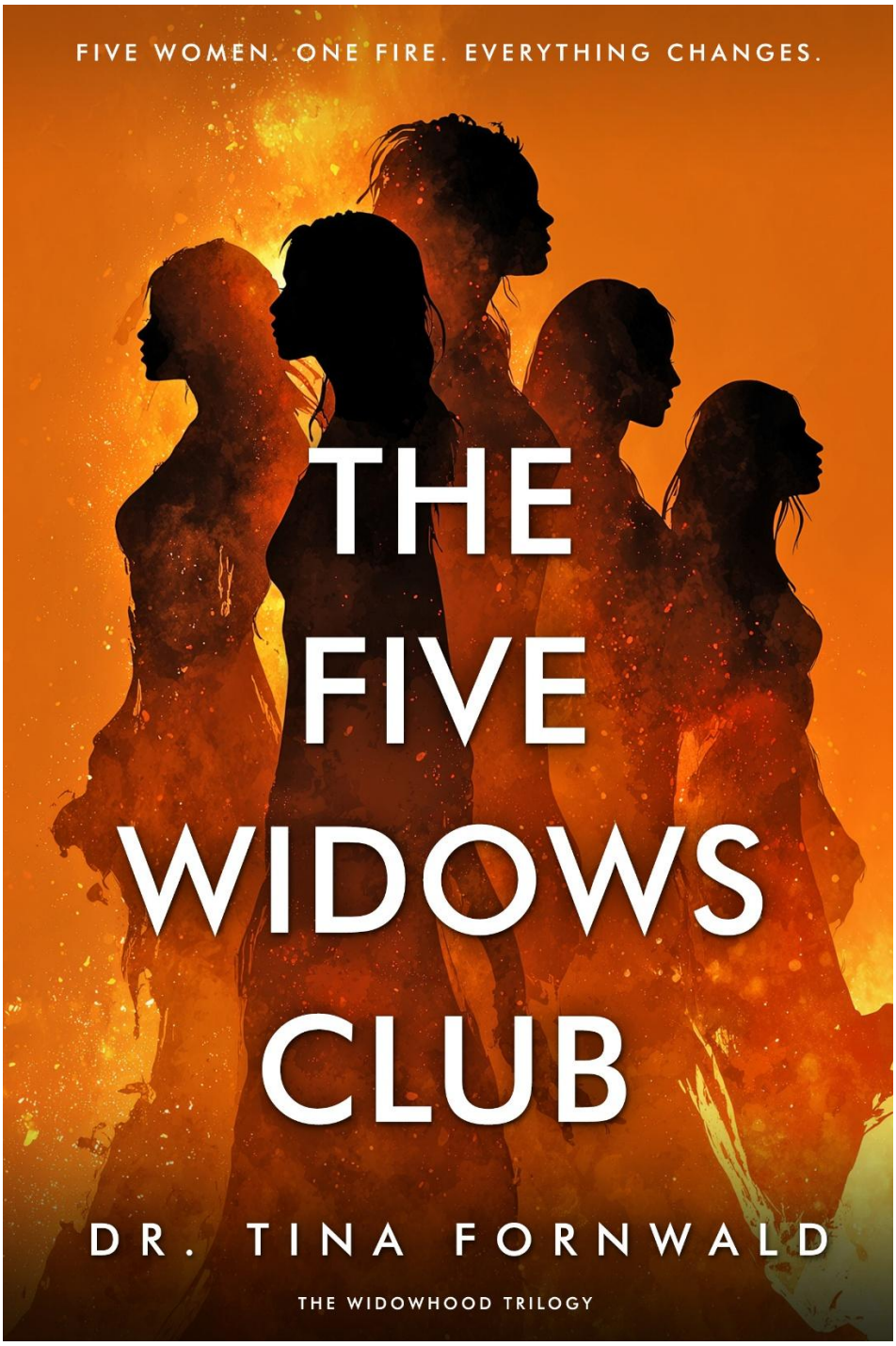
THE FIVE WIDOWS CLUB

Book Club Guide



Stories open the door to conversation. This guide was created to help book clubs explore the themes of grief, friendship, and healing at the heart of *The Five Widows Club*.

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A Note from the Author

Dear Reader,

Thank you for choosing *The Five Widows Club* for your book club conversation. It means more than you may realize.

This story was born from a simple truth I have witnessed again and again: grief can feel isolating, but healing often begins when people find the courage to sit together and tell the truth about what they are carrying.

While *The Five Widows Club* is a work of fiction, the emotions within these pages are deeply real. Every character carries a different kind of loss, a different personality, and a different path toward healing. Some move forward cautiously. Some resist change. Some lean into friendship before they are ready. And all of them discover that grief does not end life, it changes it.

One of the most powerful parts of writing this novel was exploring what happens when people who feel broken begin to see themselves reflected in one another. Community has a quiet way of doing that. It reminds us we are not the only ones learning how to live again.

As you discuss the story together, I hope the conversation goes beyond the plot. I hope you talk about resilience, friendship, second chances, and the complicated ways people carry love after loss.

And if someone in your group has experienced grief personally, my deepest hope is that this story reminds them of something important: You are not alone.

Thank you for reading, reflecting, and allowing these characters to sit with you for a while.

With gratitude,

Dr. Tina Fornwald
Author of *The Five Widows Club*

Meeting Places in *The Five Widows Club*

Two places quietly shape the journey of the women in this story.
Neither place is extraordinary, yet both become sacred in their own way.

One is where the women first gather. The other is where they begin to change.

The Community Center: Where the Circle Begins

The women first meet in a modest church basement used for community gatherings. The room is simple and practical: folding chairs arranged in a loose circle, fluorescent lights humming overhead, and mismatched mugs left behind from other meetings.

Nothing about the room is elegant or curated. The walls are painted cinderblock beige, the floor is worn linoleum, and the chairs scrape loudly whenever someone shifts their weight. Every sound echoes slightly, making it impossible to hide when someone arrives late or stands to leave.

June unlocks the room before each meeting and quietly sets up the chairs. Sometimes one of the women helps her, though no one is assigned the task. The ritual is small but meaningful: the circle is created together.

The group meets in the early evening, when the day's responsibilities have ended but exhaustion has not yet taken over. Each woman arrives carrying the invisible weight of her own loss.

In this room, there are a few rules but several quiet understandings:

- No one compares grief.
- No one offers easy explanations.
- No one tries to fix another person's pain.

Instead, the room offers something rare: a place where grief can be spoken aloud without needing to be resolved.

Over time, the circle of chairs grows closer. At first, they sit with space between them. Later, their knees angle inward, bags drop to the floor, and the circle tightens without anyone noticing.

The community center does not heal them.

But it becomes the first place where they realize they are not alone.

The Cabin: Where the Women Begin to Change

If the community center is where the women learn to speak about grief, the cabin is where they begin to live differently because of it.

The cabin sits away from the noise and pace of their everyday lives. Removed from schedules, work, and familiar routines, the women create space to sit with themselves and with one another.

Here, there are no folding chairs arranged in careful circles. Instead, there are shared meals, quiet mornings, long conversations, and the unstructured time that grief often demands but daily life rarely allows.

Each woman experiences the cabin differently.

For **Monique**, the quiet interrupts the routines she has used to keep moving forward.

For **Trish**, the absence of structure removes the discipline she relies on to stay in control.

For **Ava**, it is one of the few places where she is not responsible for protecting someone else every moment.

For **Carmen**, the presence of others begins to soften the isolation where guilt has taken root.

For **Joyce**, the cabin disrupts the intellectual understanding of grief she has carefully constructed and invites her into something more emotional.

The cabin does not offer answers.

What it offers instead is time, honesty, and the possibility that healing can happen in the company of others who understand.

Character Guide

June Wells

June is the steady presence at the center of the group. She facilitates the meetings in the borrowed community room where the women gather, creating a space where grief can exist without judgment or pressure. June does not dominate the conversation; instead, she quietly holds the room, allowing each woman to find her own voice and pace of healing. Her calm presence becomes the emotional anchor of the group.

Ava Holloway

Ava is the youngest widow in the group and the mother of a toddler daughter, Charlotte. Her husband, Myles, died suddenly in a car accident, leaving Ava to navigate early widowhood while raising a young child alone. Much of her energy is focused on maintaining stability for her daughter, which means her own grief is often pushed aside. Ava moves through life in a state of quiet exhaustion, holding everything together one routine at a time.

Monique Ellison

Monique is a creative and thoughtful woman who owns a boutique built alongside her late husband, Darnell. His sudden heart attack shattered the life they were actively building together. Monique appears composed on the surface, but grief quietly interrupts her daily routines and her sense of the future. She is learning how to move forward while still honoring the deep partnership that shaped her life.

Carmen Alvarez

Carmen is highly capable and professionally successful, but privately, she carries overwhelming guilt after her husband Miguel died by suicide. She believes her own past mistakes contributed to his death and punishes herself by refusing forgiveness or relief. Carmen's grief is complicated by shame, self-blame, and a longing to be seen without judgment. Her journey is one of confronting the question of whether she deserves healing at all.

Trish Dennison

Trish is a disciplined military widow whose husband, Grant, died while deployed. Her life is built around structure, faith, and responsibility, and she approaches grief the same way with control and restraint. As a mother to an adult son, she believes she must remain strong at all times. Beneath that strength, however, is a deep fear that if she allows herself to collapse fully, she may never recover.

Joyce Campbell-Morgan

Joyce lost her wife, Evelyn, after a long illness that allowed time for anticipatory grief but not for the reality of life afterward. Thoughtful and observant, Joyce approaches grief intellectually at first, studying it to understand it. Over time, the stories of the other women begin to move her beyond analysis and into lived emotional experience.

The Spouses We Never Meet

Before grief entered their lives, each woman in *The Five Widows Club* shared a love story. While the novel focuses on the women who must learn to live after loss, the people they loved remain present in memory, habit, and heart.

These are the partners whose lives shaped the women we meet in the story.

Myles Holloway

Myles was Ava's partner and the father of their young daughter, Charlotte. Their life together was built around the small rhythms of new parenthood, late-night calls, baby monitors glowing in the dark, and quiet reassurances that they were learning this new life together. Myles was thoughtful and steady, often reminding Ava that she was never alone, even when life felt overwhelming. His sudden death leaves Ava navigating motherhood and grief at the same time.

Darnell Ellison

Darnell shared a creative and joyful partnership with Monique. The two built a life and a business together, filling their days with laughter, music, and small gestures of encouragement. Darnell had a way of grounding Monique when her perfectionism took over, reminding her that life didn't have to be flawless to be meaningful. His unexpected death leaves Monique learning how to carry forward the dreams they once built side by side.

Miguel Alvarez

Miguel brought music, creativity, and warmth into Carmen's life. Their home was filled with laughter, dancing in the kitchen, and the playful rhythm of shared routines. Beneath that joy, however, Miguel carried struggles Carmen could not fully see. After his death, Carmen is left wrestling with guilt and unanswered questions, trying to reconcile the love they shared with the pain that followed.

Grant Dennison

Grant was a military officer whose life was defined by service, discipline, and devotion to his family. To Trish, he represented strength and steadiness, a partner she trusted completely. Their life together followed the rhythms of military life, deployments, routines, and quiet moments on the porch before he left for duty. His death while serving leaves Trish grappling with how to maintain the strength she believes he expected from her.

Evelyn Campbell-Morgan

Evelyn was Joyce's wife and the great love of her life. Their relationship was built over years of shared laughter, hard-won commitment, and the quiet courage of loving openly. Evelyn's long illness gave Joyce time to prepare intellectually for the loss, but not for the emptiness that would follow. Even after her passing, Evelyn remains deeply present in Joyce's memories, rituals, and the life she continues to live.

Themes to Notice While Reading

While *The Five Widows Club* tells the story of five women navigating life after loss, the novel also explores deeper themes about grief, identity, friendship, and the human capacity to rebuild life after profound change.

As you read, consider how these themes appear throughout the story.

Grief Has Many Faces

One of the central ideas in the novel is that grief does not look the same for everyone. Each woman experiences loss differently depending on her personality, circumstances, and life stage.

Some losses come suddenly. Others follow a long illness. Some leave unanswered questions, while others bring quiet exhaustion.

Notice how each character's grief unfolds in her own way and how those differences shape the group dynamic.

The Power of Being Witnessed

The women in the story do not fix one another's grief. Instead, they witness it.

The support group becomes a space where each woman can speak honestly without fear of judgment or pressure to "move on." Sometimes the most powerful form of support is simply being seen and heard.

As you read, notice how the act of witnessing begins to change the women over time.

Friendship as Survival

The relationships between the women slowly grow from cautious conversation into something deeper. Their friendships form not because they planned it, but because they recognize pieces of themselves in one another's stories.

Through shared moments, some quiet, some painful, some unexpectedly humorous, the group becomes a lifeline.

Consider how friendship evolves throughout the novel and how it helps the women move forward.

Identity After Loss

Each woman enters the story with an identity shaped by her relationship.

Wife. Partner. Caregiver. Parent.

When that relationship changes, the question becomes: *Who am I now?*

The novel explores how each character struggles with redefining herself while still honoring the love she lost.

Love Does Not End

Although the novel centers on widowhood, it is ultimately a story about love.

The women do not stop loving their partners after a loss. Instead, they learn how to carry that love forward in new ways through memory, ritual, growth, and connection with others.

As you read, notice how love continues to influence the women's choices long after their partners are gone.

Learning to Live Forward

Healing in *The Five Widows Club* is not about forgetting or replacing what was lost. It is about learning to live again while carrying the past with honesty and compassion.

Each woman moves forward at her own pace, discovering that life after loss is not about returning to who they once was but about becoming someone new.

A Quiet Truth Behind the Story

Though these spouses are no longer physically present in the women's lives, they remain woven into everything that follows. Love does not disappear when a life ends. It changes shape.

In *The Five Widows Club,* the women are not only learning how to survive loss. They are learning how to carry love forward.

Conversation with the Author, Dr. Tina

1. What inspired you to write *The Five Widows Club*?
The story grew out of my own experience with grief and the many conversations I have had with people navigating life after loss. I have spent years listening to widows and widowers share their stories that are rarely spoken openly in everyday life. I wanted to create a novel that honored the complexity of grief while also showing the power of friendship and community in the healing process.

2. Why did you choose a group of women rather than focusing on a single widow?
Grief rarely happens in isolation, even though it often feels that way. By bringing several women together, I could explore how different personalities, life stages, and experiences of loss shape the grieving process. Each woman represents a different way people cope with loss, and together they show that there is no single "correct" path through grief.

3. The women meet in a support group and later spend time at a cabin together. Why were these settings important to the story?
Place matters in grief. The community center provides a neutral space where the women can speak honestly without pressure from family, work, or expectations. The cabin, on the other hand, removes them from their daily routines and forces them to slow down. Those two environments allow different parts of their grief and their healing to emerge.

4. Each widow carries a different kind of loss. Why was that important for the story?
In real life, grief is shaped by circumstances. Some losses are sudden, others anticipated. Some are surrounded by unanswered questions, while others follow a long illness. By including different kinds of loss, the novel reflects the many ways people experience grief and the many ways they try to move forward.

5. What do you hope readers take away from this story?
I hope readers come away with a deeper understanding of grief and the courage it takes to keep living after loss. More importantly, I hope the story reminds people that no one has to walk through grief alone. Community, honesty, and compassion can make even the most difficult journeys more bearable.

6. Did writing this story change the way you think about grief?
Yes. Writing the novel reminded me how personal and unpredictable grief can be. Even when we believe we understand loss, another person's story can open our eyes to something new. The women in this story taught me that healing doesn't mean forgetting; it means learning how to carry love forward in a different way.

7. What role does friendship play in the healing process for these characters?
Friendship becomes a lifeline for the women. They don't fix each other's grief, but they witness it. That kind of shared understanding can be incredibly powerful. Sometimes healing begins simply because someone else is willing to sit beside us in the difficult moments.

8. What would you say to someone who is currently grieving?
I would say that grief is not something you have to rush through or solve. It is something you learn to live alongside. If you are grieving, be patient with yourself and allow space for both sorrow and moments of hope. And if possible, find people who are willing to walk beside you.

Continuing the Conversation

If your book club would like to continue the conversation about grief, healing, and the inspiration behind *The Five Widows Club*, you can learn more about Dr. Tina Fornwald's work through:

- **Widowhood Real Talk with Tina Podcast:** https://widowhood-realtalkwithtina.org/podcast/
- **Join The Five Widows Club Widowhood Community:** https://tinafornwald.com/books/

A Guide for Book Clubs

Why This Book Works for Book Clubs

The Five Widows Club was written with conversation in mind. The novel explores grief, friendship, identity, and healing through the experiences of five very different women.

Because each character responds to loss in her own way, readers often find themselves relating to different parts of the story. These perspectives naturally lead to thoughtful conversations about life, relationships, and resilience.

Book clubs frequently enjoy discussing:

- Which character did they connect with most
- How grief and healing are portrayed
- The role of friendship in rebuilding life after loss
- How people carry love forward after someone dies

There are no simple answers in this story, only honest questions. That makes it a powerful book to read together.

Perfect for These Readers: Perfect for Readers Who Enjoy

- Character-driven novels about friendship
- Stories that explore resilience after loss
- Emotionally honest women's fiction
- Books that spark meaningful discussion
- Novels like *The Midnight Library*, *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, or *The Authenticity Project*

Host Your Own Five Widows Club Night

Bring the spirit of the novel into your gathering: Ideas for your book club meeting:

• Arrange chairs in a circle, just like the group in the story.
• Invite each member to share which character they connected with most.
• Light candles or create a cozy atmosphere to reflect the reflective tone of the novel.
• Consider sharing a simple meal or dessert, emphasizing the importance of community and connection.

The goal isn't to recreate the story but to create a space where honest conversation can happen.

Quick Guide for Book Club Leaders

Thank you for choosing *The Five Widows Club* for your book club conversation. This novel explores grief, friendship, resilience, and the ways people rebuild life after profound loss. The following suggestions can help guide a meaningful and engaging discussion.

1. Begin with personal reactions

Start the conversation by inviting members to share their overall impressions of the book.
You might ask:
What emotions did the story stir up for you?
This allows everyone to join the conversation before moving on to deeper themes.

2. Explore the characters

The story follows five women navigating grief in different ways.
Invite members to reflect on which character they connected with most and why.
Different perspectives often lead to the most interesting conversations.

3. Discuss the themes

Encourage the group to explore some of the larger ideas in the novel, including:

- How grief looks different for each person
- The role of friendship and community in healing
- How people redefine themselves after loss

These themes often resonate with readers on a personal level.

4. Allow space for reflection

Because the story touches on loss and healing, some readers may connect with the material emotionally.
Allow the conversation to move naturally between discussion of the novel and personal reflection if members feel comfortable sharing.

5. End with the bigger message

Before concluding the meeting, invite members to reflect on the story's overall message.
You might ask:
What do you think the novel ultimately says about love, grief, and moving forward?

Book Club Discussion Questions

These questions are designed to spark conversation. Your group may choose the questions that resonate most.

Opening Reflection

1. What emotions did this story stir up for you as a reader?
2. Which character did you connect with most deeply, and why?
3. Did any moment in the book remind you of something from your own life or someone you know?

Character Exploration

4. Each woman enters the group carrying a different grief story. Which character's journey felt the most transformative to you?
5. How does June's role as the facilitator shape the group's growth? What makes her approach effective?
6. Ava struggles with balancing motherhood and grief. How did her experience resonate with you?
7. Joyce often appears guarded. What do you think lies beneath her strength?
8. Carmen's personality brings a different energy to the group. How does humor or boldness function in grief recovery?
9. Monique's relationship with her sons adds another layer to her grief journey. How does parenthood change the way grief is experienced?

Themes of Grief and Healing

10. The women meet in a support group setting. What role does community play in the healing process?
11. The book shows grief not as a straight line but as a winding path. Did this portrayal feel realistic to you?
12. Which moment in the story best captured the complexity of grief?
13. The novel explores how grief changes identity. In what ways do the women redefine themselves throughout the story?

Friendship and Connection

14. How do the relationships between the women evolve?
15. What does the story suggest about the importance of chosen family?
16. The women support one another in different ways. Which act of support stood out to you the most?

Life After Loss

17. The characters face the challenge of building a life after loss. What does "moving forward" look like for them?
18. Did the story change your perspective about widowhood or grief?
19. How does the book balance sorrow with hope?

Big Picture Questions

20. What message do you think the author hopes readers will take away from this story?
21. If the women from the group met five years from now, where do you imagine each of them would be in life?
22. What scene or line from the book stayed with you the longest?

Optional Personal Reflection (for groups that want deeper conversation)

23. What have you learned about grief from your own life or from supporting someone else?
24. What does healing look like to you?
25. How can communities better support people experiencing loss?

A Letter to Book Clubs from the Author

Dr. Tina Fornwald

Dear Book Club Friends,

Thank you for choosing *The Five Widows Club* as part of your reading conversation. It is a gift to know that these characters and the questions they carry are now sitting in a room with you.

Stories have a unique way of opening doors that everyday conversations sometimes avoid. Grief, love, friendship, guilt, resilience, these are not small topics, and they rarely have simple answers. My hope in writing this novel was not to solve grief or explain it, but to create space for it to be witnessed.

Each of the women in this story walks a different path through loss. Some arrive at the support group guarded. Some arrive exhausted. Some arrive unsure if they belong there at all. Yet over time, they discover something powerful: healing often begins not with answers, but with honesty and companionship.

If your group finds itself talking about the characters long after the discussion questions are finished, the story has done exactly what I hoped it would.

There are no right or wrong answers. The beauty of book clubs is that every reader brings their own life experiences to the conversation, and those perspectives enrich the story in ways I could never have fully imagined while writing it.

Most of all, I hope this novel reminds readers of something simple but important: grief may change our lives, but it does not erase the love that came before it.

Thank you for reading, reflecting, and sharing this journey.

With gratitude,

Dr. Tina Fornwald
Author of *The Five Widows Club*

About the Author, Dr. Tina Fornwald

Dr. Tina Fornwald is an author, transformational speaker, and grief advocate dedicated to helping individuals navigate life after loss and gain a sense of belonging. Her work integrates psychological insight, pastoral care, and lived experience to support people who feel stuck in their grief and are searching for a path forward.

Dr. Tina is the founder of **Widowhood Real Talk with Tina**, a nonprofit organization and podcast that creates space for honest conversations about grief while connecting widows and widowers to resources, support groups, and community.

Her passion for this work is deeply personal. Dr. Tina was married to her late husband, **Mark**, for twenty-nine years before he died unexpectedly during a weekend vacation. In the years that followed, she experienced firsthand the profound disorientation that loss can bring. Rebuilding life after Mark's death required time, courage, and the steady support of her **family, friends, and faith**, which became foundational in helping her move forward.

Over time, Dr. Tina discovered that grief does not follow a predictable path and that healing often begins when people find the courage to share their stories with others who understand. That realization ultimately led her to create spaces where widows and widowers could connect, speak openly, and support one another.

In the years since her loss, Dr. Tina has continued to move forward with life in meaningful ways. She is a **mother**, a **breast cancer survivor**, and someone who has experienced the complicated reality of **dating and remarrying after widowhood**. These experiences have shaped her understanding of how grief evolves and how people can find hope, love, and purpose again while still honoring the past.

Before dedicating herself fully to serving the widowhood community, Dr. Tina spent **21 years in the United States Army**, where she developed a deep appreciation for resilience, leadership, and the strength people discover in the face of adversity. By the time *The Five Widows Club* reaches readers, she will have transitioned into **full-time advocacy for the widowhood community**.

Through her writing and speaking, Dr. Tina helps people recognize the emotional patterns that can leave them feeling stuck in grief. She is the creator of the framework:

Where Grief Gets Stuck™ and The Five Survival Patterns™

This framework identifies five common ways people cope with overwhelming loss:

- Self-Blame
- Spiritual Betrayal
- Isolation
- Numbing Through Extremes
- Emotional Suppressions

These patterns are not failures. They are survival strategies that often emerge when grief feels unbearable.

Her novel *The Five Widows Club* explores many of these emotional realities through story, friendship, and the shared journey of five women learning how to live forward after loss.

Through her writing and advocacy, Dr. Tina Fornwald invites readers into the same truth explored in *The Five Widows Club*: grief may change the shape of life, but it never erases the love that came before it.

Connect with Dr. Tina Fornwald

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🎙 **Widowhood Real Talk with Tina Podcast:** https://widowhood-realtalkwithtina.org/podcast/
Thoughtful conversations about grief, healing, and life after loss.

Continue the Conversation

If *The Five Widows Club* resonated with you, the conversation does not have to end with the final page.

Many readers discover that stories about grief open the door to deeper reflections on love, loss, resilience, and how people rebuild their lives after profound change.

Dr. Tina Fornwald created **Widowhood Real Talk with Tina** to provide a place where those conversations can continue.

Through the podcast, community discussions, and support resources, widows, widowers, and those who care about them can connect, share their experiences, and discover they are not alone.

You are warmly invited to continue the conversation.

Connect with the Community

🎙️ **Widowhood Real Talk with Tina Podcast:** https://widowhood-realtalkwithtina.org/podcast/
Thoughtful conversations about grief, healing, and life after loss.

Dr. Tina Fornwald occasionally joins book clubs for **virtual discussions** of *The Five Widows Club* and its themes.

Book clubs, libraries, and community organizations interested in hosting a conversation, virtual discussions, or speaking engagements are welcome to reach out.

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