

The Source

a teaching novel · by Brandon Neary

Reading Guide

A guide to reading the novel alongside the Field Guide — with discussion questions for groups and teams.

How to read this book

The Source comes in two halves that answer each other.

The novel comes first. Read it as a story — follow Dana Reilly through fifteen years of habit and the patients who start, quietly, not to fit her assumptions. Resist flipping to the back for “the answer.” The lessons are meant to arrive the way they arrive for Dana: through a patient she can't explain, advice she's sure of and then isn't, and the slow work of changing her mind.

The Field Guide comes second. Once you've finished the story, treat it as the reference you return to. Each of its twenty sections opens with a single italic line calling back to a moment from the novel, then drops the fiction and teaches the principle directly. Read a chapter that surprised or frustrated you? Find the matching Field Guide section and you'll usually see the idea named outright.

A rhythm that works well: read the novel straight through, then read the Field Guide with a pen. Most readers find their favorite chapters land harder on the second pass, once the principles have names.

A note for non-clinical readers: you do not need a dental background. Dana learns the science as she goes, and so will you. Everything that matters to the story is explained in plain language inside the story.

A word about Dana

Dana Reilly is good at her job. That's what makes her a useful guide — and what makes her mistakes worth watching. For fifteen years she has believed in a legible world: effort was the lever, compliance was the answer, and the patients who failed had, somewhere, failed to do the work. Her recurring move is to trust that world over the evidence in front of her — and to argue with the data when it tells her something inconvenient. She isn't careless. She's confident. The book is largely about the distance between those two things.

As you read, notice who Dana blames when a case doesn't fit — the test, the patient, the timing — and how long it takes her to turn the question back on her own reasoning.

Discussion questions

Pick the set that fits your group. None of these have a single right answer; the good conversations happen in the disagreements.

THE STORY

- 1 Dana has cleaned Margaret Doyle's teeth for fifteen years — she knows about Donald and the birds and the shortbread in the Scottie-dog tin. Yet a fifteen-year mystery has been sitting in Marg's mouth the whole time. What does the book suggest about the way knowing a patient well can hide what's actually going on?
- 2 In Chapter 4, Jack Bowen brings in a spit test “from the internet,” and Dana sends him home with what she later calls a pat on the head and a wrong conclusion. What does she see in that visit, and what does she decide not to see? Where have you made the same call?
- 3 Chapter 9 finds Dana spending a week trying to prove her mentor wrong — setting out, methodically, to show that effort was the variable after all. Why is that the most honest thing she could have done with a claim she didn't want to believe?
- 4 Russ Kohler the framing contractor and Tyler Cade with his “family teeth” both arrive certain they already know their own story. How does each man's certainty get in the way? Is Dana's certainty any different from theirs?
- 5 When Marg's retest comes, Anand refuses to read it for Dana — “I read the first one because you couldn't yet. You can now. This isn't my report and it was never going to be — it's hers.” Why is that refusal a bigger gift than help would have been?
- 6 Renata, the practice's other hygienist, lands the book's sharpest skepticism: every new toy is a miracle for about a month. Was there a point where you were on her side? Did the story earn its way past that line, or did you stay skeptical?

THE PRACTICE

- 1 The book pulls apart two things we tend to fuse: compliance and diagnosis. Dana has to give up a world where the patients who failed had simply failed to do the work. How does losing that world change the way you'd talk to a patient you'd otherwise file under “isn't trying hard enough”?
- 2 Match the verb to the evidence. In Chapter 26, Dana finally understands that Jack's isolated finding called for watch-and-confirm — not antibiotics and not scaling a mouth that had nothing to scale. Where do you say more than the evidence supports — over-treating in one direction, or under-reading in the other?
- 3 A clean exam is a starting point in this book, not a verdict — Jack looked fine twice. Where in your own work does a quiet first look get mistaken for a closed case?
- 4 Dana's instinct, trained by fifteen years of more, itches to “do something bigger” even when the finding says do less. The Field Guide calls right-sizing down half the value. Why is doing less so much harder than doing more?

- 5 Marcus says no the first time — and the book is clear he wasn't wrong to. What changed his mind wasn't a better argument; it was two free tests and a folder of the times the test told them to do less. What does that say about how change actually happens in a practice that can't afford to gamble?
- 6 Tyler Cade is twenty-four, with a tooth that's started to feel wiggly and a family history he treats like a weather report. What does his case do to the rule that “perio was an old person's disease”? What rules are you carrying that a single patient could break?

THE BIGGER PICTURE

- 1 Two images run underneath the whole book — the attic (a leak you can't see, staining a ceiling far from its source) and the garden (planting a bed, tending what should grow rather than only killing what shouldn't). Which one captures the idea better for you, and why?
- 2 In Chapter 25, Marcus tells Dana to write it all down — “I need it on paper” — and she realizes a thing that lives in one person isn't a method: it was a talent, and talents die. What in your own work would walk out the door in your head tomorrow if you did?
- 3 The Field Guide prints a line from the story above each lesson it teaches. After finishing the novel, which scene would you most want printed above which principle?

Pairing the story with the Field Guide

After the novel, take the two or three chapters that stuck with you most and read them back to back with the Field Guide section that names what they were teaching. The novel shows a person learning something the hard way; the Field Guide gives that same thing a name you can carry into Monday morning.

Three threads worth tracing all the way through:

- Compliance and diagnosis are different axes. What's wrong with a patient versus whether the plan will hold. The story keeps collapsing these until Dana learns to separate them; the Field Guide states it directly. (See §14, The Method, and §16, Talking to Patients.)
- Sometimes the test says do less. Jack's quiet result, the de-escalations, the clean report treated as a finding rather than a failure. (See §11, The Clean Report and Discordant Results, and §12, Right-Sizing the Result.)
- Say what the evidence supports — no more. A result can tell you something is present without telling you the whole story about why or what to do. The book is careful about that line, and so is the Field Guide. (See §13, Reading in Context, and §18, The Systemic Associations — Present Responsibly.)

The method the whole story builds toward has a name in §14: Test → Target → Rebuild → Verify. Watch where each step shows up in the novel before it's ever spelled out.

Ground rules for a good conversation

- Let people finish the novel before the group dissects the ending — Jack's recall and Marg's retest are worth meeting in order.
- Bring a case. The book is most useful when its lessons sit next to a patient you actually saw.
- Disagree out loud. Dana is wrong in instructive ways, and Renata's skepticism is a useful counterweight. A group that only agrees with the book learns less than one that argues with it.

For facilitation, a session-by-session schedule, and a practice-application worksheet, see the companion Book Club Kit. To order copies for your team, visit orapath.com.