

## ***What Happened***

### **Hillary Rodham Clinton**

This reading group guide for *What Happened* includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

### **Introduction**

Hillary Rodham Clinton is the first woman in US history to become the presidential nominee of a major political party. She served as the 67th Secretary of State—from January 21, 2009, until February 1, 2013—after nearly four decades in public service advocating on behalf of children and families as an attorney, First Lady, and Senator. She is a wife, mother, and grandmother.

In *What Happened* Hillary Clinton reveals, for the first time, what she was thinking and feeling during one of the most controversial and unpredictable presidential elections in history. Now free from the constraints of running, Hillary takes you inside the intense personal experience of becoming the first woman nominated for president by a major party in an election marked by rage, sexism, exhilarating highs and infuriating lows, stranger-than-fiction twists, Russian interference, and an opponent who broke all the rules. This is her most personal memoir yet.

### **Topics & Questions for Discussion**

1. In the Introduction to *What Happened*, Hillary Clinton begins with this statement: “In the past, for reasons I try to explain, I’ve often felt I had to be careful in public, like I was up on a wire without a net. Now I’m letting my guard down” (p. xiii). Discuss what it means to be “up on a wire without a net.” How has this shaped Hillary Clinton’s public persona through her career?
2. In the days after her defeat, Hillary Clinton found comfort in a Maya Angelou poem that includes these lines: *You may write me down in history/ With your bitter twisted lies,/You may trod me in the very dirt/ But still like dust, I’ll rise* (p. 30). Are there poems or other literary works that provide comfort and inspiration to you? Hillary Clinton also mentions time with friends and an occasional glass of chardonnay as things that helped her cope. What are some ways you deal with a personal setback?

3. Hillary Clinton says she ran for President because “It was a chance to do the most good I would ever be able to do” (p. 52). Do you believe that this mission inspires everyone who runs for President regardless of his or her political party? What else do you think inspires someone to run for President?

4. Clinton writes about the difference between sexism and misogyny and talks about ways she believes they played a role in the 2016 presidential election, from scrutiny of her looks and behavior to the fact that we elected a man caught bragging on tape about sexual assault to the highest office in the land. She also makes the point that, despite progress made since Clinton started her career in the 1970s, a double standard is still very much at work in our culture. Do you see the distinction between the two terms? What are some examples in politics, business and other arenas of American life where you’ve noticed sexism and misogyny taking place?

5. Were you surprised to read that Clinton had been such an impassioned activist in her youth, going undercover to expose schools trying to avoid integration and wearing a black armband in memory of the students killed at Kent State? If so, why do you think you’d never seen before her in this light?

6. Clinton writes movingly about how her longtime friendship with her first boss and mentor, founder of the Children’s Defense Fund Marian Wright Edelman, strained in the ‘90s when they found themselves at odds over welfare reform. Fortunately they were later able to repair their relationship. Do you think we can put aside differences of opinion for the sake of friendship today, or has politics become too personal?

7. “In 2008, the major news networks’ nightly newscasts spent a total of 220 minutes on policy. . . . In 2016, it was just 32 minutes” (p. 223). Do you find this sudden decline in serious political reporting shocking? How did you feel about the widespread coverage and longevity of Clinton’s e-mail scandal? Was the coverage of the e-mails fair or symptomatic of a deep problem in the way news stories are now covered by the press?

8. Clinton writes of her appreciation for the galvanizing power of big ideas that people can organize around, even if they may take generations to achieve. She also writes about our need to reevaluate our assumptions about which policies are politically viable, as some bold ideas—like “Alaska for America”—may be more achievable than we might think. What are some creative policies you’d like to see enacted? Do you think these could become law in your lifetime?

9. In the aftermath of the election, many people felt that the deciding votes came from “the real America” of coal miners and factory workers who had long felt pushed to the side (p. 283). Hillary, though, has a different conception of what “the real America” looks like and what they might need, now more than ever. Do you agree with her point of view?

10. After her election night defeat, Hillary describes a moment she shared with her husband, Bill Clinton: “We lay down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Bill took my hand, and we just lay there” (p. 388). Earlier in the book, Hillary describes her marriage to Bill Clinton as “the most consequential decision of my life”. Were you surprised by the election night moment? Was your perception of the Clinton’s marriage changed by what you read in the book?

11. Hillary is profoundly affected by a *Life* magazine article written by Republican Lee Atwater (p. 434). What does the excerpt of the article mean to you? Do you think the “spiritual vacuum” is still an issue in America today?

12. “Resist, insist, persist, enlist” is a new mantra for Hillary (p. 451). What have you seen others doing in your community to resist, insist, persist, and enlist since the election? In what ways have you been living by this mantra? Are there other things you would like to be doing?

### **Enhance Your Book Club**

1. Watch the clip of *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* where the female writers draft “thank you” notes to Hillary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpzeQ1Z3Ut0>. Write your own “thank you” notes to Hillary Clinton and read aloud with your group.

2. In writing her book, Hillary Clinton hoped to help people who may or may not agree to come together and talk to one another in engaged dialogue. Brainstorm topics you might like to discuss with someone in your life who you has different beliefs than you.

3. Many reviewers have noted that *What Happened* is different from other political books and memoirs. Read another contemporary political book or another book about the 2016 election to compare and contrast.

4. In the final section of the book, Hillary Clinton talks about her new mantra: “resist, insist, persist, enlist.” Together with your group, decide on a way you can resist, insist, persist, or enlist in your own community. Schedule an outing to volunteer in your community, register voters, canvas for a local candidate, or attend a protest.