The Tally of the Living: a guide for reading groups

The Tally of the Living is the story of a man who cannot die while one human being is left alive, and of the friends, clerks and enemies who keep count of him. These questions are meant to start arguments rather than settle them; none has a right answer. Each section is marked with how much of the trilogy it gives away, so a group can stop at the book it has reached.

Twenty-Seven Million Mornings

Spoilers: everything in Book One.

1. Kesh marks every sunrise out of ten and has never given one a ten. What does the habit do for him? By the end of the book, did you read it as discipline, as a joke, or as a way of keeping the world at arm's length?

2. He has taken a post as a school usher four hundred and eleven times. How does the book make that sort of repetition feel, and what changes about this one?

3. Kesh trains himself never to catch a falling thing, then catches the scalding flask in Zola's class without thinking. Why might the story turn on a reflex rather than a decision?

4. After Ishe, in "The Woman Who Grew Old", he decides never again to stay for the end of anyone. Is leaving before the end a kindness, or a way of not being there?

5. Kesh keeps his past in Cairns, objects that give a day back when he holds them. Bash writes everything down. The Tally has kept a daily book on Kesh for five thousand years, and each chapter opens with one of its entries. Which of these ways of keeping a record felt like care to you, and which like control?

6. Crane brings honey-cakes, keeps his voice down and never threatens. At the ford he points out that his House may not harm Kesh, but has never promised the same for the people near him. Why might a courteous antagonist be harder to bear than a cruel one?

7. Zola's sum says that if Kesh ever had a child, his line is now in everybody. How does that change what he owes the strangers around him?

8. At the Whale Fair the town and the fair, some twenty-seven thousand people, live, and three men from the *Patient Wife* drown. Was Kesh right to lean? What does Zola do for him, and for them, by writing their names on a clean sheet?

9. Mistress Ndovar bars the schoolroom door and tells the children what the Tally is. Its greeting is *Be counted*, and the answer is *And count*. What is the difference between being counted and being counted on?

10. The book begins as a school caper and does not stay light. Where did you feel it turn? Near the end, a morning is marked a four and a cut will not close. Why leave Kesh there?

The Closed Hand

Spoilers: everything in Books One and Two.

1. "Luck is moved. It is not made." Kesh tries to do good without leaning, with buried hoards and mended fences. Is acting early a way out of that arithmetic, or another form of it?

2. On Zola's wall of pins, every red pin sits beside a blue one. What does the wall suggest about what it costs to be near someone who matters?

3. Ileth is not impressed by Kesh. Her people sleep through every winter, and he sits up beside her through one. What does her sleep show you about his life, and why does the wake-watch matter so much to him?

4. "The Ferryman" and "Forty Oars" step away from the main story: a ferryman who grows old, and six years as one oarsman among forty. Why do you think they sit where they do in the book?

5. Crane tells Kesh that a man in a hole can't do anything. "We want you tired." How does the book turn tiredness into a weapon, and did you see it working on him before he did?

6. Crane was nineteen, a clerk's son whom nobody had ever seen, when a woman on a mat said his name back to him and asked whether he would like to be counted. Does knowing that change how you judge him? Does what he does at Hallen?

7. At the funeral, Luz asks whether it hurts less with practice. Kesh had thought grief would form a callus, like a rope-hand, and finds instead

that you only know it better each time. Was that true to your own experience?

8. In the deep archive, "nobody close" turns out to have suited the Closed Hand very well. In "The Count of My Own" it was his daughter's advice. Whose rule was it, finally?

9. Under the hill, Kesh chooses where the price falls, believing the cavern empty. Bash had already gone back for him. How much of what follows is Kesh's to carry? What do you make of Bash asking to go out on a seven?

10. The book ends with Kesh, for the first time, choosing not to hold anyone up. Did you understand the choice? Did you forgive it?

The Last Quiet

Spoilers: everything in all three books.

1. "Nothing has gone wrong. Things have only stopped going right." The bread does not rise; the herring do not come. What does the souring suggest about the luck any of us takes for granted?

2. Luz reads out the list of the dead as people, not names: what they were like at breakfast. Kesh held Bash while he died and never knew he was afraid of geese. What is the difference between knowing a name and knowing a person?

3. In the lead room the dying go quiet for Kesh. At first it feels like being let out of a fire; later he tells himself it is rest. Is relief from feeling the same thing as rest?

4. Kesh spent a year in the lead room with Saa and never once asked who her people were. Why does Luz's answer, to print all nine thousand two hundred and six of their names, matter more here than any apology?

5. Kesh says he has stayed to the end for only two of the people he loved, and he made a rule about it. The ledgers show him at the bedsides of strangers more than eleven hundred times, and there is no rule about those. A Minder once wrote in the margin, *Why does he do this?* What does that do to the story he tells about himself?

6. Hrenn tells him he must want them more than he wants to be done. Is wanting a thing you can choose? Where in the book does Kesh choose it?

7. Nomvu Dlamari cuts Saa bread and tells her she will never forgive her. Luz never forgives Kesh, but asks him to stay. What does the trilogy say about forgiveness that is not given, and about what can be offered instead?

8. In the sealed Cairn, Kesh learns that for thirty thousand years he has told a meeting the wrong way round. The thing did not flinch from him; he hid his face from it. What stories do people keep about themselves that are the wrong way round?

9. Kesh gives the Count to everyone alive and keeps one share. Afterwards, dice fall as dice do. What does the world lose, and what does it gain?

10. Why does the first ten go to a plain grey morning, with a child on the wall asking whether it is still blue underneath?

The whole trilogy

Spoilers: all three books.

1. The Tally began with a grain-clerk who noticed one thumb on her jar seals. It ends with a book that has no heading on the spine, kept at Reyne's, where anyone may see it. How does the idea of counting change across the three books?

2. Kesh's name means the one who sits up with the dying. Who sits up with whom across the trilogy, and who is there at the end?

3. The narrators change: Kesh and Zola for two books, then Luz, Ileth, Mags, Ansel, Hobb, Saa, and even Soot. What does the widening of voices do to the story, and why might it happen in the last book?

4. A man who cannot die ends by wanting to live, and then dying. Is it a happy ending? What would have made it a sadder one?

5. Soot is there from the first morning to the last. What does a dog who will not stay in her place add to a story about watching?