

1. Both Berry and McKenna enter the story believing they understand who they are. How does each character's self-image shift over the course of the novel?
2. Berry often tries to hold everything together for everyone else. When does that strength become a weakness?
3. McKenna's ambition is both admirable and isolating. How does the novel balance those two truths?
4. Which character surprised you most — and why?
5. The novel asks who carries the emotional labor in a family. Who do you think carries the most weight, and do they realize it?
6. In what ways do the characters protect one another, and in what ways do they unintentionally hold each other back?
7. The book explores the tension between independence and needing help. Which characters struggle most with accepting support?
8. How do societal expectations around motherhood, success, and achievement influence Berry, McKenna, and Glory's decisions?
9. Several characters are forced to reconsider long-held identities. Which reinvention felt most earned to you?
10. What lessons do you think McKenna learned from her mother before she died? Which were most valuable? Were any detrimental?
11. Are there moments when characters make choices you disagreed with but understood emotionally?
12. The story avoids simple villains. How does this affect the way you judged characters' actions?
13. The title *Breathing Under Water* suggests survival under pressure. What does "breathing under water" mean for different characters?
14. How did the dual perspectives shape your understanding of events? Did your loyalties shift as the story progressed?
15. Did you ever find yourself judging a character harshly before later understanding them?
16. How do Berry and McKenna challenge each other's assumptions about success, responsibility, and identity?

17. Throughout the novel, characters struggle with the tension between caring for others and caring for themselves. Which characters do you think strike that balance well, and which do not?
18. What moment in the novel felt like the true turning point for Berry or McKenna? Did you recognize its importance when it happened, or only later?
19. McKenna's ambition is one kind of pressure. How does it compare with the expectations facing Phil, Leo, and Beck?
20. How do different supporting characters, like Coach Catapano, Lark, Glory, and others, define what it means to protect someone?
21. By the end of the novel, how has the story redefined what strength looks like?