

sarah wilson

first, we make the beast beautiful

reading group guide

1. How did you define anxiety before reading *First, We Make the Beast Beautiful*? Did the way you perceive anxiety change after you read the book? If so, in what way?
2. Sarah is given the opportunity of a lifetime when she is invited to ask His Holiness The Dalai Lama one question. She uses this to a chance to ask the spiritual leader how to silence her anxiety to which she receives a rather surprising answer. If given the chance to ask The Dalai Lama one question about coping with anxiety, what would you ask him? Why?
3. “The Chinese believe that before you can conquer a beast, you must first make it beautiful.” Sarah first came across this proverb in psychiatrist Kay Redfield Jamison’s memoir *An Unquiet Mind*. Drawing inspiration from this for the title of her memoir, Sarah has used this proverb as a key to better understand her anxiety. How do you interpret this proverb? Can it be applied to something that you’ve struggled with in your own life?
4. Sarah mentions the “Something Else” quite early in the book. And suggests that it’s the outward grasping for this ephemeral idea that sees us get anxious. How would you describe this Something Else Sarah talks about? What description of it made sense to you in your life?
5. “Anxious behavior is rewarded in our culture. Being highly strung, wound up, frenetic and soooo busy has caché.” In what ways does society reward anxious behavior? Do you observe yourself validating your own frenetic and busy behavior? What impact do you think it has on your life?
6. While anxiety is a serious mental disorder, Sarah points out that the disorder can have its benefits. Discuss some of the benefits stated in the book. Has anxiety benefited you or someone that you know in any of these ways?
7. One suggestion Sarah gives to understanding your anxiety better is to read the works of great minds who have accomplished great things while being anxious. She gives a list of suggested reading, which includes *The Noonday Demon* by Andrew Solomon, *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath, and *M Train* by Patti Smith. What other books would you add to this list?
8. Sarah offers readers a number of practical tips on how to cope with anxiety. What was your biggest take away from all the tips she gave? Which ones would you apply to your own life, or share with someone who has anxiety?
9. Do you recall the bit where Sarah shares advice to the loved ones of folk with anxiety? She writes that anxious folk sometimes seem to be controlling those around them. But Sarah suggests that understanding that the anxious are often just trying to control circumstances or triggers that could send them into an spiral and thus ruin the movie night or picnic might help. They’re not trying to control the loved ones! What are your thoughts on this?
10. Sarah states in the book that one of the reasons she wrote the book was because she was sick of feeling lonely. She wanted to have a better conversation about the topic and wrote the book to start the public discussion. How would you like to see it talked about, how would you like to keep the conversation going?

