April 10: *In Shock*, memoir by Dr. Rana Awdish.

This is the deeply personal story of a single patient in a medical drama; at the same time, its scope encompasses the medical profession and each one of us insofar as we all will face illness and hard truths about our own vulnerability. How and where do you see Awdish connecting the dots between the personal and universal?

Are you convinced by her critique of physical training and behavior?

Where do you find meaning and light amidst the chaos and darkness of her journey?

Highlight any passages or moments that strike you as surprising or eye opening in some way, and consider what makes them so.

What is most memorable to you about Awdish’s story? What is the first thing you would tell someone else about the book?

April 17: *Imagine Me Gone*, novel by Adam Haslett.

How did you respond to Michael’s scathing parodies?

What do you imagine is behind Michael’s fixations on the women he becomes fixated on?

Did you find Haslett’s alternating points of view in the novel effective? If so, in what way, and if not, why?

Do you think, as Michael tries to insist to Alec (on p. 325), that there are times when suicide is warranted, when a person should not be required to stay alive?

April 24: Handout of short prose, three short stories and two personal essays.

“The Use of Force,” short story by William Carlos Williams:
How do you see power being used and abused in this story? Can the use of force for the good of another ever be justified by a doctor—or, for that matter, by anyone?

What role does class play?

“In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried,” short story by Amy Hempl:

This story seems to be an elaborate diversionary dance around its primary subject; did Hempl’s method strike you as fitting or frustrating or something else?

What do you make of the story’s ending, the story of the chimp?

“People Like That Are the Only People Here,” short story by Lorrie Moore:

Where do you locate the force or power of this story—beyond the situation of a very ill baby? How does Moore make you feel? Note places where language and tone or attitude stand out.

What do you make of the last two lines of the story?

“The Learning Curve,” essay by Atul Gawande:

What do you imagine was Gawande’s purpose in writing this piece?

What was the effect for you of Gawande’s figuring so centrally in the essay’s narrative?

“The Cure for Racism is Cancer,” essay by Tony Hoagland:

Why do you think Hoagland chose to use the second person in this piece? Who is the “you” he is addressing and with what effect(s)?

How would you characterize the author’s attitude or tone? Does it change in various places?

Can you point out some spots or methods that suggest that this author’s usual gig is as a poet?

May 1: Being Mortal, nonfiction by Atul Gawande.

What are the serious needs of those suffering terminal illness that our systems of medical care have neglected? What factors are responsible for those failures to meet patients’ primary needs?
Gawande sees our society seeking an “alternative to withering in old age homes and dying in hospitals.” What might help?

What does Gawande see as the benefits of a doctor’s being neither paternalistic/authoritative nor merely informative, but rather “interpretive”?

What might Gawande say to the narrator/main character of “In the Cemetery Where Al Jolson is Buried” if he could get to her in time?

Pick out passages that resonate with you or that seem provocative or in some way worth attending to so we can zoom in on them together.

May 8: Handout of selected poems.

Which poem or poems affected you most strongly—and why?

Identify poems or parts of poems that you found puzzling, and try to articulate what puzzles you about them.

May 15 (3-327) and May 22 (328-658): Cutting for Stone, by Abraham Verghese. (Yes, yes, it’s long.)

What does Cutting for Stone reveal about the emotional lives of these doctors? Contrast the attitudes of Hema, Ghosh, Marion, Shiva, and Thomas Stone toward their work. What draws each of them to the practice of medicine? How are they affected, emotionally and otherwise, by the work they do?

How does Ethiopia’s political unrest figure in the novel? Do you see it functioning thematically in any way as well as moving the action forward?

Did you find Verghese’s use of medical details—especially in the course of describing surgeries—effective or not? Why or why not?

What does Cutting for Stone reveal about the way illness is viewed and treated in Ethiopia and in the United States? To what extent are these differences reflected in the split between poor hospitals, like the one in the Bronx where Marion works, and rich hospitals, like the one in Boston where his father works?

In the novel, Thomas Stone asks, “What treatment in an emergency is administered by ear?” How does the correct answer, “words of comfort,” jibe with your own experience? What does Cutting for Stone suggest about the roles of compassion and hope in medicine?
Almost all of the characters in the novel are living in exile from their home countries — Hema and Ghosh from India, Marion from Ethiopia, Thomas from India and then Ethiopia. Verghese is of Indian descent but was born and raised in Ethiopia, went to medical school in India, and has lived and worked in the United States for many years. What effects do you think the immigrant experience has on these characters? Do they feel enriched by varied perspectives or feel something is missing?

Near the very end of the book, Marion, as narrator, says, “The world turns on our every action, and our every omission, whether we know it or not.” Consider how this resonates in the novel—how interdependent everything and everyone is throughout, most notably beginning with the undercover love (unknown even to themselves for a time) of Thomas Stone and Sister Mary Praise.

Does Cutting for Stone seem to you to have a hero? If so, who would you point to and why?