

## Discussion Guide



*Brace for Impact: A Memoir*  
Gabe Montesanti

The Dial Press  
2022  
405 pages  
ISBN: 978-0593241

LGBTQIA+ Health

### Summary

"Gabe Montesanti grew up queer in a working-class, conservative Catholic family in the Midwest, where she was taught to prioritize strength and impenetrability over vulnerability and honesty. In this emotionally, physically, and spiritually abusive environment, she developed a severe eating disorder, never learned to trust herself, and lived in constant fear. As she enters graduate school, she vows to put the trauma of her past behind her and to learn to fully inhabit her body. She joins Arch Rival Roller Derby in St. Louis, one of the top-rated teams in the country, and instantly falls in love with the roughness, intensity, and roller derby's open embrace of people who are literally and figuratively scarred. Gabe soon finds community, safety, and a sense of belonging, reveling in the queer-friendly environment, the tattoos, glitter, and campiness. She chooses the derby name Joan of Spark, modeling herself after the fierce and independent Joan of Arc, to signify all the ways she's left behind the baggage of her childhood. But when Gabe suffers a catastrophic injury, her unresolved trauma catches up to her. In the aftermath of her accident, it becomes impossible to ignore how the physicality of roller derby mirrors the emotional violence of her upbringing. Gabe's arduous physical recovery is matched only by the painful process of beginning to heal her emotional wounds. Forced to reckon with her past, she must decide if she can be Joan of Spark off the track, too--skating into a bolder, truer future"-- Provided by publisher

### Questions

1. *Brace for Impact* is so much more than a "roller derby memoir"; Olympian Abby Wambach called it "a universal story of healing and triumph." There are many entry points to Gabe Montesanti's story: body image, trauma, community, family, being a member of a team, and the intersection of physical and emotional recovery/wellbeing. What themes resonated with you and why?
2. Besides the author, which character did you most relate to and why?
3. Discuss Montesanti's relationship with her mother. Which scenes or memories stood out to you? How do relationships with our mothers or parents inform our understanding of ourselves and the world? Did you identify with the complexity of the relationship, which encompassed both pain and tenderness?

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4. When Montesanti describes why she wanted to be a part of roller derby, she says: “I was looking for a community, but I also wanted to feel pain.... The unpredictability and violence of the sport were magnetic in their appeal.” What do you make of this statement, and why do you think she felt that way?
5. Other than the pure physicality of roller derby, what other things do you think the title *Brace for Impact* refers to?
6. Early in Gabe and Kelly’s relationship, the author felt a bitter class resentment “from little things, like the fact that [Kelly] rarely noticed prices at the grocery store and sometimes went weeks without checking her bank account balance.” Why do you think class issues are so fraught, especially within a relationship?
7. How much did you know about roller derby before reading *Brace for Impact*? What surprised you about the sport?
8. Ninja Sass’em, Taryn It Up, Bruise Almighty, Stormin’ Norma, Cruella Belle-Ville, Bricktator, Nanny McWhee, and of course, Joan of Spark. What would your roller derby name be, and why? The punnier the better!
9. What do you think is the best part of being in the roller derby community? The competition, the support, the camaraderie, the validation, the creativity? Which would you appreciate, and why? One skater tells the author: “Nobody joins roller derby if they have a perfectly happy life.” After reading *Brace for Impact* do you believe in this sentiment? Why or why not?
10. Weight and body issues are a major theme throughout *Brace for Impact*. The author says: “It was the lens through which I saw myself: my body as a vehicle to win, my body as something of which there literally needed to be less.” How did the author’s view of her body change over the course of the book?
11. How did you feel when Kelly and Gabe’s mother got into a fight at the hotel after Gabe’s accident? Do you think Gabe should have gone home with Kelly? Why do you think she stayed at the hotel with her mother and sister? After that intense scene, the author’s mom tells her: “You’re still one of us.” What do you think she meant by this?
12. If you were directing the movie version of *Brace for Impact*, who would you cast in the roles of Gabe, Kelly, Gabe’s mother, and Taryn?