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1. What is the central idea discussed in the book? What issues or ideas does the author explore? Are they personal, sociological, global, political, economic, spiritual, medical, or scientific?

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2. Do the issues affect your life? How so—directly, on a daily basis, or more generally? Now or sometime in the future?

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3. What evidence does the author use to support the book's ideas? Is the evidence convincing...definitive or...speculative? Does the author depend on personal opinion, observation, and assessment? Or is the evidence factual—based on science, statistics, historical documents, or quotations from (credible) experts?

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4. What kind of language does the author use? Is it objective and dispassionate? Or passionate and earnest? Is it polemical, inflammatory, sarcastic? Does the language help or undercut the author's premise?

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5. What are the implications for the future? Are there long- or short-term consequences to the issues raised in the book? Are they positive or negative...affirming or frightening?

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6. What solutions does the author propose? Who would implement those solutions? How probable is success?

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7. How controversial are the issues raised in the book? Who is aligned on which sides of the issues? Where do you fall in that line-up?

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8. Talk about specific passages that struck you as significant—or interesting, profound, amusing, illuminating, disturbing, sad...? What was memorable?

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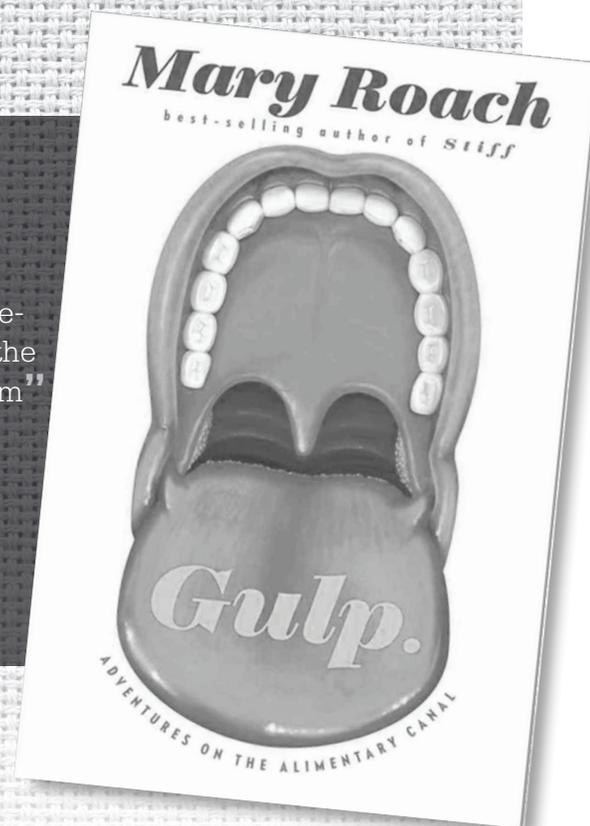
9. What have you learned after reading this book? Has it broadened your perspective about a difficult issue—personal or societal? Has it introduced you to a culture in another country...or an ethnic or regional culture in your own country?

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## Discussion Questions

# Book Club in a Bag

“Fascinating and sometimes ghastly tour of the gastrointestinal system”  
- *Litlovers.com*



Kalamazoo  
Public Library

[kpl.gov/book-club-in-a-bag](http://kpl.gov/book-club-in-a-bag)



**Mary Roach** is an American author, specializing in popular science. To date, she has published five books: *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers* (2003), *Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife* (2005) (published in some markets as *Six Feet Over: Adventures in the Afterlife*), *Bonk: The Curious Coupling of Science and Sex* (2008), *Packing for Mars: The Curious Science of Life in the Void* (2010), and *Gulp: Adventures on the Alimentary Canal* (2013).

The common theme throughout all of Roach's books is a literary treatment of the human body. Roach

says of her publication history,

*My books are all [about the human body], Spook is a little bit of departure because it's more about the soul rather than the flesh and blood body, but most of my books are about human bodies in unusual circumstances.*

When asked by Peter Sagal, of NPR, specifically how she picks her topics, she replied, "Well, its got to have a little science, it's got to have a little history, a little humor—and something gross."

While Roach does not possess a science degree, she attempts to take complex ideas and turn them into something that the average reader can understand. She takes the reader with her through the steps of her research, from learning about the material to getting to know the people who study it, as she described in a public dialog with Adam Savage:

*Make no mistake, good science writing is medicine. It is a cure for ignorance and fallacy. Good science writing peels away the blindness, generates wonder, and brings the open palm to the forehead: "Oh! Now I get it!"*

Regarding her skepticism about the world around her, Roach states in her book *Spook*,

*Flawed as it is, science remains the most solid god I've got. And so I've decided to turn to it, to see what it had to say on the topic of life after death. Because I know what religion says, and it perplexes me. It doesn't deliver a single, coherent, scientifically sensible or provable scenario... Science seemed the better bet. (Author bio from Wikipedia.)*

## Book Summary

The irresistible, ever-curious, and always best-selling Mary Roach returns with a new adventure to the invisible realm we carry around inside. "America's funniest science writer" (Washington Post) takes us down the hatch on an unforgettable tour.

The alimentary canal is classic Mary Roach terrain: the questions explored in *Gulp* are as taboo, in their way, as the cadavers in *Stiff* and every bit as surreal as the universe of zero gravity explored in *Packing for Mars*.

Why is crunchy food so appealing? Why is it so hard to find words for flavors and smells? Why doesn't the stomach digest itself? How much can you eat before your stomach bursts? Can constipation kill you? Did it kill Elvis? In *Gulp* we meet scientists who tackle the questions no one else thinks of—or has the courage to ask. We go on location to a pet-food taste-test lab, a fecal transplant, and into a live stomach to observe the fate of a meal.

With Roach at our side, we travel the world, meeting murderers and mad scientists, Eskimos and exorcists (who have occasionally administered holy water rectally), rabbis and terrorists—who, it turns out, for practical reasons do not conceal bombs in their digestive tracts. Like all of Roach's books, *Gulp* is as much about human beings as it is about human bodies. (From the publisher.)