

Discussion Questions for *Life List* by Olivia Gentile

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not? Are you glad you read it?
2. The author says she is not a birder. She stumbled on Phoebe Snetsinger as a topic for a book. Do you trust her as a narrator? Do you wonder about Phoebe's side of the story?
3. How did you find the pace of the book? Did the author's detailed descriptions of Phoebe's trips enhance the book or bore you?
4. Did you learn something unexpected, and if so what was it? Were you surprised by anything that you learned from this book?
5. The author discusses the death of Phoebe's mother Naomi (p 180), which Phoebe missed, tells us that Phoebe skipped her daughter Penny's wedding (p 243), and reports Phoebe's reaction upon hearing that four American birdwatchers were kidnapped by guerillas in Colombia (p 266): "Did they see the antpitta before they were captured?" What is your reaction to someone who chooses her priorities the way Phoebe did?
6. The most telling passage in the book comes in a summary on page 249:

"On the one hand, in the nine years since she'd been raped and changed her mind about retiring, she'd caused her husband a great deal of pain, missed her mother's funeral, alienated three out of four of her children, and missed her eldest daughter's wedding. She'd gotten a deadly strain of malaria, played roulette with her health by postponing two surgeries, taken a trek dangerously beyond her abilities, survived a boatwreck that could have been fatal, and traveled in countries where there was no rule of law. She'd strained her relationships with tour guides, lost sleep over "rivals" who were far behind her, and, increasingly, lost sight of the reasons she'd gotten into birding in the first place.

"On the other hand, she'd inspired her kids to travel far and wide and to pursue careers in the natural sciences, and she'd been a mentor and a role model to birdwatchers everywhere. She'd seen birds that had brought her to ecstasy; made dozens of friends around the world; shown, as she'd hoped to, that you could build a big list without letting your standards slip; risen to the pinnacle of a subculture still dominated by men; been feted by her peers, her family, and the press; and amassed a breadth of ornithological knowledge that hardly anyone, amateur or professional, could rival."

Does it seem worth it to you? Do you think Phoebe thought it was worth it?

7. Does anyone have any experience with the kind of obsessive behavior Phoebe displayed?
8. Has anyone had any other experiences that relate to places or experiences in the book?
9. Did the book trigger any emotions while you were reading it?
10. Do you have unanswered questions? If the author were here, what would you ask her? What about if Phoebe Snetsinger were here?
11. Are there other questions you would like to ask or comments you would like to make?