

CROOKED LINES: BENT, NOT BROKEN

Reading Guide & Discussion Questions

A Companion to the Memoir by Shaun Critzer

About This Guide

This reading guide is designed for individual reflection or group discussion. Whether you’re reading *Crooked Lines* alone, with a book club, in a recovery meeting, or with a therapy group, these questions will help you go deeper into the themes of trauma, addiction, and redemption.

How to Use This Guide:

- Take your time with each question
 - There are no “right” answers—only honest ones
 - Feel free to skip questions that don’t resonate
 - Use a journal to record your thoughts
 - Share what feels safe to share in group settings
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PROLOGUE: The Liquor Store Parking Lot

Discussion Questions:

1. Shaun describes “muscle memory” leading him to the ABC store without conscious thought. Have you ever experienced autopilot behavior that led you somewhere your rational mind didn’t want to go? What was that like?
2. The prologue shows Shaun 18 months sober but feeling “worse, not better.” Why do you think early sobriety can sometimes feel harder than active addiction?

What does this reveal about the nature of recovery?

3. Shaun says he “walked into a liquor store and cried over bourbon bottles like a crazy person.” What does this moment of vulnerability reveal about his relationship with alcohol? About his state of mind?
4. The old-timer at the meeting says it got better when he “stopped fighting it” and “finally surrendered.” What do you think surrender means in the context of recovery? How is it different from giving up?
5. Shannon tells Shaun that not drinking is “everything.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about a time you stood at a crossroads between two very different paths. What helped you choose?
 - What does “surrender” mean to you? When have you experienced it?
 - Who in your life has been your “Shannon” —the person who showed up when you needed them most?
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PART I: FOUNDATIONS & FRACTURES

Chapter 1: The Oxygen Tent

Discussion Questions:

1. Shaun’s first memory involves being trapped in an oxygen tent at age 4. How might this early experience of isolation and fear have shaped his later responses to trauma?
2. The chapter describes the sexual abuse by the swim coach as “confusing” rather than overtly violent. Why is this type of abuse particularly damaging to a child’s understanding of boundaries and consent?
3. Shaun says his counselors at The Ranch had to “convince him it counted as abuse.” Why do you think survivors of childhood sexual abuse often minimize or rationalize what happened to them?

4. The chapter title references both the oxygen tent (literal cage) and “The Cage” pool (metaphorical cage). What other “cages” appear throughout Shaun’s story?
5. Shaun describes carrying shame “like a stone in my chest” for three decades. What is the relationship between shame and silence? How does naming abuse begin to break that cycle?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about a childhood experience that shaped how you see yourself or the world.
 - What “cages” have you lived in—literal or metaphorical?
 - If you could speak to your childhood self, what would you say?
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Chapter 2: The Caged Animal In Me

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the chapter title connect to both the swim pool nickname and Shaun’s internal experience of rage and restlessness?
2. Shaun describes his body responding to the abuse in ways that created confusion. How does this complicate a child’s ability to understand what’s happening to them?
3. The counselor’s statement—“You were six years old. You couldn’t consent”—is a turning point. Why is it important to hear abuse named clearly and definitively?
4. Shaun says he “cried for three hours” after that session. What do you think those tears represented?
5. How might unprocessed childhood trauma manifest in adult behavior, relationships, and coping mechanisms?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about a time someone helped you see a painful truth you’d been avoiding.

- What truths have you been reluctant to name in your own life?
 - How has your body “kept the score” of past experiences?
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Chapter 3: Fire & Fracture

Discussion Questions:

1. [Add specific questions based on Chapter 3 content about the fire incident and family dynamics]
2. How do childhood traumas compound when they occur close together in time?
3. What role does family play in either healing or perpetuating trauma?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about a “before and after” moment in your childhood.
 - How has your family of origin shaped your understanding of safety, trust, and love?
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PART II: BUILDING THE ARMOR

Chapter 6: The Crash & The Whisper of Iron

Discussion Questions:

1. Shaun gets cut from the basketball team and turns to weightlifting. How does this moment illustrate the concept of “building armor” as a response to feeling inadequate or vulnerable?
2. The chapter mentions Michael Jordan also getting cut from his high school team. Why do you think Shaun chose weightlifting instead of returning to basketball? What was he really trying to prove?
3. How can healthy coping mechanisms (like fitness) become unhealthy when used to avoid dealing with underlying pain?

Reflection Prompts:

- What “armor” have you built to protect yourself? How has it helped? How has it hurt?
 - Write about a rejection that changed the direction of your life.
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Chapter 7: The Machine

Discussion Questions:

1. What does the nickname “The Machine” reveal about how Shaun wanted to be perceived? About how he saw himself?
2. How does obsessive focus on physical perfection relate to trying to control internal chaos?
3. Shaun describes using fitness as armor. When does self-improvement become self-punishment?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about a time you tried to “fix” your outsides to avoid dealing with your insides.
 - What would it mean to be “enough” exactly as you are?
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PART III: THE FALL

Chapter 16: The Fall

Discussion Questions:

1. What factors contributed to Shaun’s descent into active addiction? How did earlier traumas set the stage?
2. Shaun describes addiction as a “solution” before it became a problem. What was alcohol solving for him?
3. How does addiction isolate people from the relationships and support systems they need most?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about a time something that started as a solution became a problem.
 - What are you running from? What would it take to stop running?
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Chapter 19: The First DUI

Discussion Questions:

1. Shaun blew a .31 BAC—nearly four times the legal limit. What does this level of intoxication reveal about the severity of his addiction?
2. Why do you think this DUI wasn’t enough to make him stop drinking?
3. What is the difference between “hitting bottom” and “choosing to stop digging”?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about a consequence that should have been a wake-up call but wasn’t.
 - What would your “bottom” have to look like before you’d ask for help?
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Chapter 21: The Protective Order Night

Discussion Questions:

1. This chapter describes one of Shaun’s darkest moments. What led to this crisis? How did earlier choices compound?
2. Shaun describes feeling like a “criminal” during custody exchanges. How does shame prevent people from seeking help?
3. What role does accountability play in recovery? How is it different from shame?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about a time you hurt someone you loved. How did you make amends?
 - What is the difference between guilt (I did something bad) and shame (I am bad)?
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PART IV: THE RANCH & RECOVERY

Chapter 24: The Ranch

Discussion Questions:

1. What made The Ranch different from Shaun’s previous attempts at sobriety?
2. Shaun describes having to “crack open thirty years of trauma.” Why is addressing root causes essential to lasting recovery?
3. How does community support recovery in ways that willpower alone cannot?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about a place or community that helped you heal.
 - What would it take for you to “crack open” and deal with what you’ve been avoiding?
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Chapter 25: The Serpent Vision

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you make of Shaun’s serpent vision during EMDR therapy? Do you interpret it literally, metaphorically, or both?
2. How does trauma get “stored” in the body? What does it mean to process trauma rather than just talk about it?
3. Shaun describes feeling the serpent “leave” his body. What do you think this represents?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about a moment of spiritual or psychological breakthrough in your own life.
 - What would it feel like to be free of the thing that’s been holding you back?
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Chapter 27: December 2009 - The First White Chip

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think Shaun’s first attempt at sobriety didn’t stick?
2. What is the difference between “white-knuckling” sobriety and true recovery?
3. The chapter shows Shaun going through the motions without real surrender. What does genuine surrender look like?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about a time you tried to change without really changing.
 - What are you still “white-knuckling” instead of surrendering?
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Chapter 28: January 1, 2013 - The Real Beginning

Discussion Questions:

1. What made January 1, 2013 different from Shaun’s previous attempts at sobriety?
2. Shaun describes finally being “willing to go to any length.” What does this phrase mean in the context of recovery?
3. How does desperation sometimes become the doorway to transformation?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about your own “real beginning” —a moment when you finally committed fully to change.
 - What would “going to any length” look like in your own life?
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PART V: REDEMPTION & REBUILDING

Chapter 29: Shannon - Meeting Her

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Shaun's relationship with Shannon differ from his previous relationships?
2. What does it mean to be loved "not in spite of your brokenness, but including it"?
3. Shaun describes Shannon seeing "the actual broken me trying to figure out how to be whole." Why is this kind of authentic vulnerability essential to healthy relationships?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about someone who has loved you at your worst.
 - What would it mean to let someone see the real you—no armor, no performance?
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Chapter 30: The Remarriage

Discussion Questions:

1. What did Shaun have to heal in himself before he could be ready for a healthy marriage?
2. How is his relationship with Shannon different from his first marriage? What changed—in him, not just in the relationship?
3. What does it mean to build a relationship on truth rather than pretense?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about the difference between the person you perform being and the person you actually are.
 - What would a relationship built on radical honesty look like?
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Chapter 31: Co-Parenting with Jennie

Discussion Questions:

1. Shaun describes his ability to co-parent peacefully with his ex-wife as “one of my greatest accomplishments.” Why is this significant?
2. How does making amends differ from simply apologizing?
3. What role does forgiveness (both giving and receiving) play in healing?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about a relationship you need to repair. What would making amends look like?
 - Who do you need to forgive—including yourself?
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Chapter 32: Cameron - The Miracle

Discussion Questions:

1. Shaun describes his relationship with his daughter as a miracle. What had to change in him to make this possible?
2. How does being a present, sober parent differ from being an absent, addicted one?
3. What does it mean to “show up” for the people you love?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about a relationship that was restored after being broken.
 - What would it mean to truly “show up” in your most important relationships?
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Chapter 33: Landon’ s Journey

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Shaun’ s son Landon’ s own journey mirror and differ from his father’ s?

2. What does it mean to break generational cycles of trauma and addiction?
3. How can parents in recovery model healthy coping for their children?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about patterns you've inherited from your family. Which do you want to keep? Which do you want to break?
 - What legacy do you want to leave?
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Chapter 34: Brody & The Blended Family

Discussion Questions:

1. What does Shaun's relationship with his stepson Brody reveal about the nature of family?
2. How does choosing to love differ from obligatory love?
3. What makes a blended family work? What challenges are unique to this family structure?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about someone who chose to love you when they didn't have to.
 - What does "family" mean to you?
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Chapter 35: The Empire - Digital Gravity & Purpose

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Shaun turn his "mess into a message" through his business?
2. What does it mean to find purpose in your pain?
3. How can work become part of recovery rather than an escape from it?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about how your struggles have equipped you to help others.

- What is your purpose? How does it connect to your story?
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PART VI: THE PROTOCOL

Chapter 36: The Protocol—Lessons from the Crooked Road

Discussion Questions:

1. Shaun shares specific practices that keep him sober. Which resonate most with you? Why?
2. How is recovery a daily practice rather than a one-time event?
3. What “non-negotiables” would you need to establish to maintain your own healing?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write your own “protocol” —the daily practices that keep you healthy and whole.
 - What would your life look like if you actually followed through on what you know you need to do?
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Chapter 37: God Writes Straight

Discussion Questions:

1. How does the Portuguese proverb “God writes straight with crooked lines” apply to Shaun’s story?
2. What does it mean to find meaning in suffering without romanticizing it?
3. Shaun says “the crooked lines weren’t mistakes; they were directions.” Do you believe this? Why or why not?

Reflection Prompts:

- Write about the “crooked lines” in your own life. Can you see any patterns or purposes emerging?

- What would it mean to trust that your story—all of it—matters?
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THEMES FOR DEEPER EXPLORATION

Trauma & Its Aftermath

Questions:

- How does childhood trauma shape adult behavior and relationships?
- What is the difference between surviving trauma and healing from it?
- How does trauma get passed down through generations? How can the cycle be broken?

Reflection: Write about your own experiences with trauma—either your own or witnessing someone else’s. How has it shaped you? What healing still needs to happen?

Addiction as Solution & Problem

Questions:

- Shaun describes alcohol as a “solution” before it became a problem. What was it solving?
- How do addictive behaviors (substances, relationships, work, etc.) serve as coping mechanisms for deeper pain?
- What is the difference between physical dependence and psychological addiction?

Reflection: What do you use to numb, escape, or cope? What would it take to face what you’re running from?

Shame vs. Guilt

Questions:

- What is the difference between guilt (I did something bad) and shame (I am bad)?
- How does shame keep people trapped in destructive patterns?
- How does speaking truth break the power of shame?

Reflection: Write about something you've been carrying shame about. What would it mean to name it, share it, and release it?

The Role of Community in Healing

Questions:

- Why couldn't Shaun get sober alone? What did community provide that willpower couldn't?
- How does isolation feed addiction and trauma?
- What does it mean to be "held" by a community?

Reflection: Who is your community? Who holds you accountable, supports you, and loves you through the hard stuff?

Redemption & Second Chances

Questions:

- What does redemption mean? Is it something you earn or something you receive?
- Shaun's story shows that redemption doesn't erase consequences—he still lost years with his kids, his first marriage ended, etc. What does redemption look like when you can't undo the past?
- How do you know when someone has truly changed vs. just performing change?

Reflection: Write about a second chance you've been given. What did you do with it? What second chances do you need to give—to yourself or others?

Faith & Spirituality

Questions:

- Shaun references “God” throughout the memoir but doesn’t prescribe a specific religious framework. What role does spirituality play in his recovery?
- What does it mean to “surrender” to something greater than yourself?
- Can you have recovery without spirituality? Why or why not?

Reflection: What do you believe about God, higher power, or the universe? How does (or doesn’t) faith play a role in your healing?

The Body Keeps the Score

Questions:

- How does trauma get “stored” in the body?
- Shaun used bodybuilding as armor, then had to process trauma through EMDR therapy. What is the relationship between physical and emotional healing?
- What does it mean to “feel your feelings” instead of numbing them?

Reflection: Where do you hold trauma or stress in your body? What would it take to release it?

GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDELINES

For Book Clubs, Recovery Meetings, or Therapy Groups:

1. **Create a safe space:** What’s shared in the group stays in the group. No judgment, no fixing, no unsolicited advice.
2. **Use “I” statements:** Speak from your own experience rather than generalizing or speaking for others.
3. **Listen without interrupting:** Give each person space to share fully before responding.
4. **Respect different perspectives:** Not everyone will interpret the memoir the same way. That’s okay.

- 5. Honor triggers:** Some content may be activating. It's okay to step out, skip a question, or pass on sharing.
 - 6. Focus on themes, not just plot:** The power of this memoir is in the universal themes—trauma, addiction, shame, redemption—not just the specific events.
 - 7. Connect to your own story:** The best discussions happen when people relate Shaun's experiences to their own lives.
 - 8. End with hope:** Even when discussing dark chapters, try to end group discussions by identifying moments of growth, resilience, or hope.
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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If this memoir brings up difficult emotions or memories:

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:** Call or text 988
- **SAMHSA National Helpline:** 1-800-662-HELP (4357)
- **Crisis Text Line:** Text HOME to 741741
- **RAINN Sexual Assault Hotline:** 1-800-656-HOPE (4673)
- **Al-Anon (for families of alcoholics):** al-anon.org
- **Alcoholics Anonymous:** aa.org
- **Narcotics Anonymous:** na.org
- **SMART Recovery:** smartrecovery.org

For trauma-informed therapy:

- Find an EMDR therapist: emdria.org
 - Find a trauma therapist: psychologytoday.com
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shaun Critzer is a recovery advocate, speaker, and author living in Charlottesville, Virginia with his wife Shannon and their blended family. He is 13+ years sober and

works to help others find hope in their own recovery journeys through his writing, speaking, and digital marketing business.

Connect with Shaun:

- Website: www.shauncritzer.com
 - YouTube: @ShaunCritzer
 - Instagram: @shauncritzer
 - Facebook: /shauncritzer
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Thank you for engaging deeply with *Crooked Lines: Bent, Not Broken*.** May you find hope in the crooked lines of your own story.**