

Discussion Questions

1. Laura muses that “she could only be her ultimate self when she was alone.” She isn’t the only one who has a clear “real” self and a constructed self. In what ways do the characters create new personas? Are these personalities convincing? Are they necessary?
2. Does Laura have the talent to be a writer? Are there rules that writers must follow, as she believes? Is Jenna correct when she suggests that it’s impossible to write without a historical knowledge of what has come before you?
3. How does the first interaction between Charlie and Jenna at the side of the road set the tone for their relationship? What changes and what remains the same once Laura is involved?

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4. It is made clear during her interview with Jenna and again at the writers' conference that Laura is not terribly knowledgeable about books and writing. Was she also naïve to involve her husband with another woman? What other characters display inexperience or ignorance?
5. Charlie and Laura are similar to Jenna and Frank in that both couples' passion for one another has cooled after years of marriage. In what other ways are the couples similar? How are they different?
6. How has e-mail affected correspondence? How has it affected writing in general? What opinions would Charlie, Laura, and Jenna each have on the topic?
7. When Charlie thinks back to his childhood and his life with Laura, he recognizes that Prairie Wind Farm "had never been his goal, in part because he'd never had any particular goals." If not his job, what else drives Charlie? What other examples are there of the gap between desire and reality?
8. Is a "conscious romance" possible? What kind of relationship would that be like?
9. Is it possible that Laura did, in fact, mean to paste Jenna's e-mail, whether Laura realizes it consciously or not? Why would she have done it intentionally? Why is her reaction to the e-mail being sent out so different from Charlie's and Jenna's reactions?

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10. Laura Rider starts a list of what women want. What would be on your list?
11. Who, in the end, has the upper hand in the Jenna Faroli Radio Show interview with Laura Rider? Or do neither or both have the upper hand?
12. Is any character responsible for Jenna and Charlie's affair? Who or what would be the cause according to Laura? Jenna? Charlie?
13. What is the attraction, either romantic or not, between Charlie, Laura, and Jenna? What does each of them provide to each of the others?
14. In this satire, are all the characters skewered equally?
15. What does Hamilton seem to be saying about the writing life? Are writers necessarily ruthless?

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Q & A with Jane Hamilton

Q: Have you encountered any Laura Riders who misunderstand and/or underestimate what it means to be a writer?

A: Through the years I've encountered her now and again, including she as me! Sometimes I'm awoken in the night by a bolt of such a beautiful idea, and I think, *That will be easy*. The book is all there before me, including the jacket, including the typeface. *I'll just do that tomorrow*, I think. In the light of day, of course, everything becomes complicated, difficult, and usually completely impossible. I usually don't understand the difficulty of a novel until I'm in the middle of it—when I start feeling certain that I'm not up to the task. I think if a writer realized what she was in for at the start of a project she might decide to change careers.

Q: Do any of Jenna's thoughts during her interview with Laura reflect your own?

A: I tend in general to think that any person who wants to make art should study the forms and the history of their genre, not necessarily in the academy, but the writer or painter will be well served to read wildly, wander through museums, etc. I don't think I'm as...severe as Jenna. And I believe that Laura Rider has a point, too: that we

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all have stories to tell. One of the thrills of being a teacher through the years is seeing who comes through—who does the magnificent thing. You can't predict who will really pull off the great stunt of a novel. I think, contrary to Jenna's stern put-down of Laura, that Laura might very well write a capable romance. She certainly knows how to work, and how to research. Like Jenna, however, if hell turns out to be full of amateur musicians, it will indeed, to me, be hellish.

Q: Just as Laura feels that she “knows” Jenna from listening to her radio show, do your readers feel they have an appreciation of (or even a relationship with) you from your books? Do you feel it is possible to understand a person with only an exposure to his or her creative works?

A: I always think it's a potential disappointment to meet writers if you love their work. I myself have had that experience a few times, feeling so thrilled to meet someone I revere, and then they turn out to be sullen, rude, unkind. They are having a bad day, a bad year. But the work, I remind myself, separate from the writer, is still there, shining and pure. Still lovable. Maybe that's a perk of being a writer—you can deflect from yourself by saying, *Wait, but look at the work, it's so much better, more generous, more careful, than I am.* I'd hate to think that someone understands me, the person from my novels—that is to say, what is it they understand? No, don't tell me! I don't want to know!

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Q: What spurred you to write a comedic novel? Was writing *Laura Rider's Masterpiece* a different experience from writing your past novels?

A: I was so blue about the way print culture is going, and I'd had some interesting students in a workshop, people who wanted to write but didn't seem to love reading or books, and I was filled with doubt about writing serious character-driven novels, that the only thing I could think to do was try to amuse myself, to try to make myself laugh, to take a stab at what is so strange and funny about writing books at this moment in American culture.

The book turned out to be a joy to write—a story that came in one puff, that wrote itself. For me comedy is either there, or it's not there—that is, there's no use in straining to try to make something funny. Comedy, it seems to me, is a gift from the cosmos. Of course you can't know if someone else will find the work funny, but it made me laugh every day, and I'm grateful for that.

Q: This story is a cautionary tale regarding love in the time of the Internet. How do you feel about e-mail, blogs, and how they and other online features have changed communication?

A: E-mail, so scary! How many times have I pressed SEND only to feel my blood go icy. WHOOPS! Everything is sped up now (although, who knows, maybe in the time of Jane Austen, with three mail deliveries a day, a romance

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could progress fairly quickly). With e-mail you can meet, fall in love, have sex, and break up in the space of about a day. What's missing, to my sensibility, is savoring the experience. Taking out the letter from your purse and reading it, and sniffing it, and reading it again, and rereading it once more. There's no better satisfaction than love on paper with ink.

Q: What do you think it is about romances that appeals to women, both in reading and writing them? Do you agree with Laura that women are looking for heroes with a feminine tenderness?

A: A good romance is about coming both to self-knowledge and a deep understanding of the beloved. That's why we still read Jane Austen, why the union of Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet is such a satisfying marriage: both of them have seen the other's most woeful flaws and sterling qualities. Add to that their youth, their beauty, Darcy's wealth—the next generation is going to be even smarter, more beautiful, wiser, better, and undoubtedly richer! I think at a deep level we read romances because we love to think of the world growing more beautiful through beautiful unions.

I do think the heroes in many romances, as Laura notes, develop their feminine sides *after* being educated by the forbearing heroine. The men often begin as brutish lugs and become sensitive human beings.

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Q: Why did you include the Emily Dickinson poem that Valerie Shippell recited to her students (“For each ecstatic instant / We must an anguish pay / In keen and quivering ratio / To the ecstasy,” page 203)? Do you think that Dickinson’s characterization of love is accurate?

A: Valerie is determined that her students understand that *life is suffering!* And that *suffering* is the theme of *literature*. What better poem to illustrate that than Emily Dickinson’s lines? People who have died of AIDS and the legions who’ve died of venereal disease might, in particular, have said that Dickinson nailed it. It’s a bitter pill to swallow, to be sure. I do wonder what experience Dickinson had that propelled her to write those lines.

Q: It’s impossible for writers to pinpoint where their ideas come from, but do you ever find yourself influenced by real life, as Laura Rider was? Similarly, do your stories ever follow you into the real world and affect your interactions with other people (perhaps to disastrous results)?

A: I am influenced by real life at every turn (but then the fun is to whack up real life, turn it upside down, inside out). If my stories ever follow me into real life, I will try to run away very, very fast.

Q: What writers do you look to for inspiration? Were there any you turned to in particular in writing this satire?

A: I read Evelyn Waugh’s *A Handful of Dust*, and Jane Aus-

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ten especially. I wanted to write a short book that was all about narrative thrust, as well as making fun of the point we've landed ourselves in the culture just now, and both Waugh and Austen were the perfect teachers.

Q: When/how did you know that writing was your calling? Did you find that you needed both courage, as Laura would attest, and research, as Jenna would emphasize? Do you have any advice for those looking to write?

A: I always loved to be by myself in my own world—that's what writing was for me. But I never imagined that my work would be published. I'm not sure it takes courage to write something if it's going to be private, but sometimes it takes starch to imagine other people reading the work. You may well feel exposed, and you know you'll be judged. It takes a lot of courage, for example, to go on Amazon and read the reviews. Research is a wonderful part of the process, a time when you can justify spending hours and hours learning about all kinds of things, and at the same time the story is coming into focus.