

Reading Group Guide

Discussion Questions

1. Dean of Admission Clarence Porter tells Portia that she needs “a little shaking up” (page 7). How does his statement foreshadow the “shaking up” that Portia’s life will undergo as the rest of the novel unfolds?
2. The title of this book is a play between the definitions of “admission” (to let something in, as in college admissions) and “admission” (to let something out, as in a confession). John muses on page 73, “Aren’t there two sides to the word? And two opposing sides.” How does each side play out in Portia’s story?
3. On page 141, as Portia scans the birth dates of this year’s applicants, she thinks, “So it’s here . . . As if she hadn’t been waiting, and for years, for just this moment.” What exactly has Portia been waiting for? In what ways has her life to this point wrapped itself around the anticipation of this moment?
4. In Chapter 15, when Jeremiah remarks on Portia’s unusual name, she tells him that her mother named her after the character in *The Merchant of Venice* because Susannah hoped that her daughter would grow up to be very wise. Do you think Portia’s name fits her? In what ways does she live up to and/or depart from the dreams that Susannah had for her?
5. Portia has a soft spot for unconventional applicants like Simone and Jeremiah, in part because she feels that she is able to identify with their needs and anxieties. In what ways is Portia herself a misfit? How does this affect her social and professional interactions?
6. How would you characterize the relationship between Portia and her mother? Are they more similar than Portia imagines? In what ways are they different?
7. On page 299, Portia finds herself defending the justice of the admissions process to Diana. “Fair is kind of an imprecise concept,” she says. What has been your experience with the college admissions process? Do you agree with her argument that “fairness” is not the most useful concept with which to measure admissions decisions?
8. At different moments in the book, both Helen and Diana discount Portia’s competence as an admissions officer on the basis of the fact

that she did not come to her job by means of formal training. In both instances, Portia finds herself struggling to explain the abstract nature of what makes her qualified to do what she does. How do you feel about the fact that a career affecting so many people so profoundly does not have an established education/training track?

9. Early on in the book, Portia laments that nobody really cares about her—all they care about is what she does for a living. And yet on page 319, she blames herself for her own isolation: “How she had managed to fool anyone . . . mystified her . . . Because the price of her gift for evasion was to have no one, not one person, who understood how horrible she felt.” Do you agree with her self-assessment? How much of Portia’s loneliness is a result of her own defensive retreat from the world, and how much of it is a product of circumstances beyond her control?
10. A major theme in this book is the grief that accompanies losing a child—whether to abortion, adoption, or even just to the process of growing up and leaving home for college. How do the various parents that we encounter in the book—Portia, Mark, John, Susannah, Deborah, and the innumerable parents of college-bound seniors—respond differently to the process of letting go of their children?
11. The internal lives of young people feature prominently in this book. Their voices, in the form of “excerpts” from college essays, begin each chapter and form the measure of Portia’s life as the story follows her through one full admissions season. What do you think Portia finds in the company of young people that she is unable to get from adult society? How do Portia’s interactions with teenagers like Caitlin, Jeremiah, and Simone affect her own sense of direction and purpose?
12. Portia’s decision at the end of the book goes against conventional standards of ethical behavior and ultimately costs her way of life. What would you have done in her situation? How does Portia’s act compare to the behavior of the parents of applicants, which she has sometimes disparaged?
13. As Portia leaves her office at the end of the Chapter 31, she takes only her copy of the Sylvia Plath poem “The Applicant” with her. Why do you think she chooses to keep this particular piece of her old life? Has the significance of the poem’s words changed for her since we first encountered it on page 321? If so, how?
14. The last scene in the book sees Portia returning home to visit her mother. In what ways does the story as a whole serve as a “homecoming” process for Portia?

Questions for the Author

How did you come to choose college admissions as the subject of this novel? Was the process of writing this book very different from the process of writing your previous books?

I've just been obsessed with this subject matter for thirty years, ever since my own fraught experience as a high school senior. Now, with a high school senior of my own, I've been forced to confront the beast again, only to find that the process is more intense, more gruesome, more bewildering than ever. I am fascinated by the way college admissions keeps coming up in our national conversation, whether directly or as an underlying theme. It's there whenever we're talking about "success," "ambition," "parenting," or "immigration." It's a flashpoint for so many of the things we care about.

What was your own experience with the college application process when you were in high school?

I cared desperately about where I went to college. I came from a highly accomplished class in a fairly intense New York private school, so I was hardly the only kid stressing out, but as my mother pointed out to me after she read a first draft of *Admission*, most of the anxiety I experienced back then was self-inflicted; my parents truly did not care where I went to college. They assumed I'd get in somewhere, and that wherever I went I'd find great friends and great teachers and have a positive experience. In this, as in so many things, they were certainly correct, but at seventeen, I was as unlikely to listen to them as my own seventeen-year-old is to listen to me today. Ergo, I bought myself a couple of years of intense fear and loathing, which is of course exactly what one really needs in high school. (For the record, I was rejected by my first choice school, among other schools, and would have attended my safety school had I not been admitted off the waiting list at Dartmouth, where I found great friends, great teachers, and had a very positive experience. Don't you hate it when parents are right?)

In the novel, Portia feels a mixture of disgust and pity toward parents like the mom at her gym who worries about the consequences of her middle schooler's failure to produce cutting-edge research for a school science project. What do you think it is about the col-

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lege admission process that makes young people and their parents so incredibly anxious?

To really respond to that question I would probably have to write *another* four-hundred-page book, but I think the answer is really enmeshed with our current anxieties about parenting, in general. Of course, parents have always cared deeply about how their children fare in the world, but for the past fifty years at least there has been a growing emphasis on this particular transition as some sort of verdict on our parenting. And lest you think I am exaggerating about the behavior of (some) parents, please be assured that nearly every anecdote I used was reported to me by a professor, teacher, counselor, or friend. And that scene in the locker room at the gym? Where the mother of the middle schooler bemoans the fact that her eleven-year-old's project does not constitute an original contribution to science? I witnessed that one myself.

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You worked as an admissions reader for a while. Did the idea for this book stem from that experience, or was it already in your mind beforehand?

I had been thinking about using the subject matter in a novel for a long while before I applied for a position as outside reader with Princeton's Office of Admission. The experience of reading applications was fascinating, humbling, reassuring, and often very emotional, and it left me deeply respectful of the applicants and the admissions officers, alike. One of the most common—and most interesting—observations readers have had about *Admission* is that they never realized admissions officers took such care with applications. I'm glad that's coming through, because I've seldom met such hardworking, thoughtful, and—yes, folks—caring professionals.

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Why did you choose to set this book at Princeton and Dartmouth, rather than at other colleges?

I saw no reason not to set the novel at the colleges I know best, and for which I have genuine affection. It was interesting to be able to cast my mind back to my own college experiences at Dartmouth (*a small school, and yet there are those who love it . . .*), and to poke a little fun at my adopted hometown of Princeton, New Jersey. Initially I did plan to set *Admission* at a fictional college, but I quickly abandoned this idea. The novel that

was emerging was skewing toward satire, and satire of this material did not interest me.

This book has so much to do with motherhood, and with our aspirations and regrets as children grow up and leave the nest. You have children of your own. Were you able to draw from your own experience in creating Portia's and Susannah's characters? If so, how?

I think that as I get older as a person and farther down the road as a writer, I write less and less autobiographically. In any case, I have never been able to write about my own family members in fiction in any but the most oblique way. My mother is as unlike Susannah as you could possibly imagine, and while my own preoccupations as a parent are certainly present in *Admission*, they appear only as themes, not as a basis for any character's preoccupations. I do feel that parenthood is a great divider for women in particular. Portia sees herself as very separate from women who are mothers, and emerging from her self-imposed isolation will require her to somehow reach across that divide. For her, the passage will be as excruciating as it is necessary.

Excerpts from imaginary admissions essays appear at the beginning of each chapter and within the body of the story itself. How were you able to channel such a variety of voices so authentically? What was the process like for entering the head of a nervous seventeen-year-old applicant?

I wanted the fragments to range from the sublime to the ridiculous, and writing them was a great deal of fun. I also wanted readers to be reminded of the vast range of life experiences that high-achieving seventeen-year-old applicants have had, and how challenging the resulting job of evaluating their applications must be. I must also acknowledge my friend, Princeton professor of philosophy, Gideon Rosen, who drafted the two philosophical application essays that appear in the body of the story. (I asked him for an essay so cutting-edge that any philosopher would instantly recognize it as the real McCoy, and another essay so pompously clueless that even Portia would be able to draw the correct conclusion.) I was also able to air my personal grievance against two woeful errors I saw far too many times in real college applications: the misuse of "myriad" (as in: "a myriad of") and the misuse of "everyday" (as in: "I write in my journal everyday.").

As Portia herself says, the world is already filled with books about the admissions process, and "...does [it] really need another one?" What makes *Admission* different from the books to which Portia refers?

Admission is the first novel to resist satirizing this material, and the first, to the best of my knowledge, to really explore the perspective of those who actually make the decisions. And not one of the many, many books on college admissions I have read has even suggested something that is entirely obvious to me, and that I truly think applicants and their families, advisors, and teachers need to hear: that the *raison d'être* of college admissions is not, in fact, to pass judgment on the applicant. As Portia herself reflects:

The system—the much maligned system that so perplexed and offended the woman beside her—did not exist to validate her child's life, let alone her child's parents' lives. It did not exist to crown the best and the brightest, reward the hardest workers, or cast judgment on those who had not fulfilled their potential by the ripe age of eighteen. It certainly did not exist to congratulate those parents who had done the best parenting, pureed the most organic baby foods, wielded the most flash cards, hired the most tutors, or driven the greatest distances to the greatest number of field hockey games.

The system... was not about the applicant at all. It was about the institution.

It was about delivering to the trustees, and to a lesser extent the faculty, a United Nations of scholars, an Olympiad of athletes, a conservatory of artists and musicians, a Great Society of strivers, and a treasury of riches so idiosyncratic and ill-defined that the Office of Admission would not know how to go about looking for them, and could not hope to find them, if they suddenly stopped turning up of their own accord.

College admissions is a rite of passage, and a harrowing one, but speaking as the recipient of more than one (*many* more than one) rejection letter, it's not the deciding factor in what makes a successful and fulfilling life. What is the deciding factor? If I ever manage to figure that one out, I'll certainly let you know.