



Reading Group Guide

Discussion Questions: *Man at the Helm*

- 1) Why do you think the author chose to tell the story from 10-year-old Lizzie's perspective? How does her vantage point shed light on the people and situations being described?
- 2) What are your thoughts on the character of Elizabeth Vogel (Lizzie's mother)? How are we meant to feel towards her? Did you find yourself condemning or relating to her?
- 3) *Man at the Helm* takes place in Britain in the 1970s, when "half the world was teetering on the brink of disbelief because of the Beatles and the kind of pills our mother was taking." What aspects of the story speak uniquely to that time and place, and which do you see as universal? Does a family "helmed" by a divorcee or single woman face any of the same challenges today? Have you or any women you know had experiences that speak to this issue of what it means to lack a "man at the helm"? What role do culture, community, and the media play in how we deal with and judge such scenarios?
- 4) Lizzie's sister looms large in Lizzie's life. How would you describe their relationship? What was your closest peer relationship (with a sibling, cousin, friend) as a child, and how did this relationship impact your beliefs about the world and your personality?

- 5) Both Lizzie and her sister are at that in-between age, not yet adults but also – after the break-up of their parents – not quite still children. Do you remember this transitional time in your own life? Was there, for you, a particular event that brought on a new awareness of the adult world?
- 6) Why is Lizzie’s sister so concerned about their mother’s playwriting? What does the activity mean to the two girls, to their mother, to the family? Do you think the snippets of Elizabeth’s plays are intended purely as comic relief, or do they add to the story in other ways?
- 7) Would you say this novel has a villain? If so, who would it be, and why? If not, how are we meant to understand and feel towards those characters whose behavior harms others?
- 8) Would you call the ending of this novel happy, or not? Is there real love between Elizabeth and Mr. Holt? Does his presence confirm the need for a “man at the helm”? What would you say the novel’s verdict is on romantic love?
- 9) Does Lizzie’s character change over the course of the novel? In what ways, and how do you know? What, if anything, has she learned by the end?

10) *The following morning she took a pan of eggs from the lit stove and flung it over our father as he sat behind his paper at the breakfast table. He screamed like a girl – expecting it to be hot – and fell off his chair.*

From its opening sequence, this novel walks the line between laughter and pain. Did you enjoy the balance? What are some of your favorite funny moments in the novel? Which moments struck you as most poignant?

A Conversation with Nina Stibbe

1. In summer of 1983 you wrote, in a letter to your sister (from *Love, Nina*) “Still working on my semi-autobiographical novel.” Had you already started work on *Man at the Helm* back then? Can you tell us the story of how this novel came into being?

I actually started writing *Man at the Helm* when I was at college not so very long after those comments. I took a course called “Autobiography & Fiction” in which we were encouraged to do a bit of autobiographical writing. Not everyone enjoyed this aspect of the class but I did.

2. What was the most challenging thing about writing this book?

One of the challenges was resisting the temptation to draw each character as either good or bad (to simplify the story). I hope I succeeded - it's important to me that no one in the story is either wholly good or bad.

3. In creating the characters, the setting of Flatstone, and the events of the story, how much did you draw on your own experience? Did you learn about ponies looking out of upstairs windows the hard way? And I have to ask: What was the inspiration behind the Man List?

I have a fear of small communities after living in a village with an unorthodox parent and chaotic family. Moving to London as a teenager, I loved the feeling of being anonymous. Also I loved that it felt as though everything and everyone was accepted - or at least tolerated.

As far as ponies are concerned, I have to tell you; Maxwell was very real. He was the most eccentric pony ever. I had him for almost eight years. For the first couple of years I was terrified of him. But for the rest, I adored him. He brought shame on me many times by doing crazy, weird things — once he ran amok in someone's tennis court; another time he kicked someone's car for no reason — but he was wonderful. I let my mother sell him because he was cramping my style. I was 14. I got home one day and he was gone (as agreed) and I was devastated.

The Man List: As the child of a divorced mother in the 1970s I remember assessing every male (married or single, young or old) we encountered as a possible suitor for our mother. The man list comes from that. Divorce was rare in those days. People weren't quite comfortable with man-less families. We were treated with suspicion and not entirely trusted. I longed to be on equal footing with everyone else and believed that my mother remarrying would achieve this.

4. Did any family members read *Man at the Helm*? If so, how did they respond?

My mum read it before I sent it to my UK publisher. I wanted to be sure she was happy with the story — the fictional aspects as well as the things she'd recognize. Some readers will assume the mother character *is* my mother and, though she's not entirely, I wanted to know she would cope with that. She laughed her way through it (which was a relief). My sister has read the whole thing

too. While she was reading she'd call me after each chapter to talk about it. The way you do with a book you're really enjoying.

5. What books and authors have most influenced you, and why?

At a crucial stage I read some books that were (or seemed) simple and naturally written. For instance: Sue Townsend's *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 3/4*. Like many people I was captivated by the trials and tribulations of this rather unremarkable teenager's life. It illustrated the idea that a familiar voice and good pace can carry a story - without the need for huge themes.

6. One of my favorite things about *Man at the Helm* is the dialogue you write. Whether in conversations between characters, excerpts from Elizabeth's plays, or Lizzie's second-hand reports of what others say, you have this incredible attunement to spoken language and its comic potential. Dialogue was also a key feature of your first book, *Love, Nina*, in which you turned real conversations from your life into mini-plays. How do you approach dialogue in writing fiction?

I love dialogue but it can be tricky. I say everything out loud as if I'm acting it. If it doesn't sound real, I change it.

7. What's a typical writing day schedule like for you? Can you share with us any routines or rituals that help you through the writing process?

I do my some of my best thinking in the early morning before I even open my eyes and then, while I should be helping my kids get their breakfast, I'm tapping notes into my phone. Also, dog walking, in the woods or on the beach near my house. Generally speaking, the earlier in the day the better for creative thinking. Unfortunately.

Having said that, I'm happy to write any time, anywhere and have endless little notebooks and notes on my phone.

8. There are so many great family scenes in this novel – you can see Vogel family history in the making and imagine the stories Lizzie and her brother and sister will tell when they're older. Do you have some favorite family stories of the Stibbes?

Yes, hundreds. There were four of us just a year apart and we got up to all sorts of mischief. We were wonderfully imaginative and of course it was easier to have adventures back then. Most of the stories are of us misbehaving in some awful way.

9. How about favorite family movies (movies you watched with your family, as opposed to movies geared towards families) from childhood?

We were big television watchers. We loved melodrama and comedy sitcoms. Also, the BBC used to show horror films every Friday night - often from the Hammer studios – nearly always Dracula, occasionally Frankenstein. We'd scare ourselves rigid. I can't watch horror films now at all.

10. Any advice for aspiring writers?

Keep writing. Write a diary and write in it every day. Write notes, snippets of dialogue, ideas that spring from nowhere and memories. And remember, I got my first publishing contract at the age of 50.