

Reading Group Guide

1. In *Donna Has Left the Building*, Donna Koczyński's life takes one unexpected turn after another—from the strange man eating hors d'oeuvres in Las Vegas, straight through to the dramatic scene on the beach on the final page. In what ways do you see Donna as being in control of her story versus at the mercy of fate or chance? Do you agree with her choices? What would you have done differently, if you'd been in Donna's shoes?
2. Donna's husband, Joey, insists that he has not been committing adultery. Donna herself questions this—and whether there should perhaps be “degrees” of adultery, as there are with manslaughter and murder. What do you think?
3. Donna is a recovering alcoholic, and her relationship to alcohol plays a major role in her journey throughout the book, influencing a lot of her decisions in unexpected ways. Why do you think her struggle with alcoholism is such an important part of her character? How would the story be different if this temptation were not hanging over her?
4. After Donna tells her what has happened with Joey, Brenda says, “I always thought he was fundamentally decent, the big doofus.” How do you feel about Joey—is he a sympathetic character or not? What about Donna's ex-boyfriend Zack?
5. Discuss how the plot is shaped by technology, such as smartphones and computers. Why do you think the author chose to make certain critical moments of the story hinge upon this modern technology? How does the new normal, our expectation of constant connectivity, change the way the story unfolds? What does this say about life in 2015?
6. One of the most poignant moments in the book is Donna's “reunion” with Brenda. Donna believes they lost touch because of her own envy at Brenda's fame and success. Do you think that's true, or are there deeper differences between Brenda and Donna that make an adult relationship harder than their breezy college bond? Why or why not?

7. Brenda predicts that Donna's life may implode in middle age and that Donna will find herself on an epic quest for "a new love, but with an old face." Do Brenda's predictions prove accurate? Do you think Donna's fate has been preordained?
8. The story takes us from Las Vegas, to Detroit, to New York City, to Nashville, to Memphis, and then, ultimately, to Greece. What role do these specific places play in the novel? Why does you think the author chose these settings in particular? How would the novel have been different if Donna had taken a different path?
9. Donna herself admits that tracking down old lovers on Facebook is so common, it's cliché. Yet she pursues Zack anyway. What do you think drove her to do this? Would you have made the same choice, in her shoes? Has there ever been a "red flag" decision in your own life that you knew was unwise but you did it anyway?
10. Discuss the role that Aggie the guitar plays in the book. At the beginning, Aggie is, quite literally, Donna's only companion, a reminder to Donna of her past. How does Donna's changing relationship to the guitar reflect her own journey? Have there been any objects, new or old, that you've carried with you in your own life?
11. At different points in her life, Donna is called different things: Donna Cohen, *M-o-o-om*, Mistress Moyet, Milady, Belladonna, Lady Chop-Chop, etc. Some of these are given to her by other characters in the book. How do they impact her—and her sense of herself?
12. *Donna Has Left the Building* is set in America in 2015. Could such a story take place in another country or era? What is universal about it? What is specific to its time and place?

A Conversation with Susan Jane Gilman

***Donna Has Left the Building* is one wild ride. Spanning the course of just a couple of weeks, it covers a vast amount of territory—both in terms of**

geography and Donna’s own consciousness and growth. How did you conceive of this story?

Stories rarely come to me fully formed or based on a single idea. Instead, I usually find myself becoming seized by one or two different impulses, which slowly merge.

Donna Has Left the Building grew out of my ongoing desire to subvert the usual stories we tell about women. I wanted to recast and update classic quest novels like *The Odyssey* and *Don Quixote* using a female protagonist instead. I imagined: What if Odysseus were a perimenopausal, former-punk rock, Gen-X woman in today’s world? What would *that* journey look like? The challenge was irresistible.

Yet as I started to write, I found I had to remain vigilant. There is a standard “midlife-crisis journey” trope that frequently finds its way into what is often called “women’s fiction” now: A woman “of a certain age” has her heart broken or her marriage fails, which sets her off on an unexpected voyage to a foreign locale, where she ultimately finds love or passion or her “true self” again. I wanted to turn this cliché inside out as well. I wanted my character to go on an epic journey that does not end with a focus on herself, but rather with her waking up to the far greater world around her—in all its brutality and complexity. I wanted Donna to become part of something much bigger than herself, with humility. She would not be a “conquering hero coming home” or a woman who “becomes her authentic self.” I wanted something different, something new, something that speaks to the world we’re living in now.

Part of your novel takes place in Greece—an unexpected twist for both your heroine and your narrative. What gave you the idea to do this?

I started this novel while living in Europe. The refugee crisis was exploding. People fleeing the Middle East and Africa were all over the headlines—and quite literally in the streets of Greece, Germany, Italy, and even in Switzerland, where I was. I’d walk through the park and see young African men sleeping on the benches, bathing in the lake. Some were the age of my youngest nephew.

I’m an American—the descendent of immigrants and refugees myself. So I feel like, “There but for the grace of God, go we...” It’s in our own history. Like Donna’s daughter, Ashley, I couldn’t bear to see lost children roaming the streets here—or see

the pictures of people's drowned toddlers washing up on the shores of the Mediterranean.

At this stage of my career as a writer, I have the immense luxury of managing my own time. I was only a short flight from Greece—and the airfare was ridiculously cheap. So I began taking time away from writing this novel to volunteer at the Eleonas Refugee Camp in Athens.

Unlike Ashley, I was under no illusions that I'd be "saving" people or doing anything more than sorting through donated clothing and handing out meals. Yet I was still vastly unprepared for the realities of the situation—in part because most of the images on the news were often an extreme sort of "misery porn." I imagined a lot of traumatized people: wailing, keening women in abayas, bloodied, half-drowned men clutching waterlogged babies. What I did not expect, however, were the kids who greeted us racing around the camp on second-hand bicycles in the dust, or pregnant women who just came up and hugged me because they were relieved to have someone give them a bra at the clothing distribution booth. Though the majority were from Syria and Afghanistan, the residents in the camp came from twenty-six different countries. Before they had to flee their homes, they were teachers and businessmen and students and artists and tailors—and little kids who were just plain little kids. This has gotten utterly lost in the rhetoric.

What I witnessed at the camp in Athens was far less harrowing than what volunteers and refugees experienced on Lesbos. Yet I still saw levels of humanity and trauma that just hadn't made it into the headlines. I became consumed by the need to write about this.

Let's go back to the beginning. While *Donna Has Left the Building* ends in an unlikely place, it doesn't exactly start off with a run-of-the-mill crisis either. Dare I ask where the idea of a Sissy Maid came from? Is there actually such a thing?

Yes! There absolutely is. Sissy Maids are a subset within the cross-dressing and BDSM communities. I first learned about them when I was living in Washington DC and writing for the alternative newspaper called *City Paper*. My editor was the

incomparable David Carr, who later went on to write about media and culture for the *New York Times*. He called me one day and said, “Gilman. There’s a story here with your name all over it. There’s a national S&M conference being held at the nearby Howard Johnson’s Motor Inn Lodge.” The top of my head nearly came off when I heard this. *Bondage at HoJo’s*? You couldn’t make this stuff up.

It was the greatest assignment ever. The BDSM community was the nicest, most earnest group of people I’d ever met. They were dressed up in their leather outfits and dog collars, sitting around on folding chairs in this basement at Howard Johnson’s, eating Dunkin Donuts and having a sing-a-long to a cassette tape of *Fiddler on the Roof* in between “fire-play” demos and a session in which dominatrixes complained about how exhausting their slaves were. I thought I was being punked—but no. On the second day, an enormous man dressed as a Sissy Maid showed up to do a caning demonstration—in which he himself was caned on his ass. Needless to say, it made quite an impression on me. Vanilla, parochial little *moi*, I’d had no idea that men craved dressing up like maids and being subservient and humiliated like that. It grabbed my imagination.

Scenes in this novel take place in Las Vegas, Detroit, New York City, Nashville, and Memphis. Why did you choose these places in particular?

Each of these cities is iconic and full of color and depth, which makes them delicious to write about. But more than anything, I feel they’re emblematic of different aspects of the American dream and the American myth.

Vegas, of course, is a monument to money, glitz, and fantasy—it’s a Disneyland for grownups. It’s also our great un-reality, where the individual is king, and it’s essentially each person for themselves. It offers a sort of democratic decadence too.

Detroit, of course, embodies of the wreck of the American dream like no other big city in America, yet it’s also becoming symbolic of our ability to rebuild and resurrect ourselves. New York City—well, besides being my hometown and the love of my life—is the Golden Door for a nation of immigrants and refugees, full of the outsized ambition, diversity, attitude, and extremity of America. Nashville? I see it as a heart of the South and southern culture, in a way, but it’s also booming now—a city of our

future. And Memphis? Graceland, Elvis, B.B. King, and the Mississippi River? Say no more.

All these cities are fundamental parts of our national legend. Since I was inspired to rewrite a mythical trope, these seemed to be the places to set the story. Plus, more than a few of them reference ancient Greece in some way. And Kid Rock really did do a fish fry at Fontanel in Tennessee in October 2015. It seemed preordained that Donna wound up there!

There are so many different aspects to this story—music, alcoholism, familial relationships, the underbelly of America, and remote parts of Greece. How much research did you do before you sat down to write—and how much did you draw from your own experience?

When I write fiction, it's always a balance between "writing what I know" and using my imagination. There are obviously some personal experiences I've drawn upon and developed in this novel, but in the end it *is* a novel: a work of fiction.

So yes, while I know New York City well and have spent time volunteering in Greece recently, I also do not, for example, have teenagers of my own—and I am not, at least as of yet, an opioid addict or alcoholic! (This sounds like I'm joking, but I know that addictions can develop over time. I'm not so arrogant as to think it could never happen to me!) For that matter, I have also never been a television psychic, or gone to Nashville, or been African American, or worked as a rigger, or driven a taxi.

The craft and exercise of fiction writing is one of intense empathy and attention. To make characters "real" and come alive, you've got to be a vigilant observer of other people and really put yourself in their shoes. Whenever I come up against my own limitations of experience or knowledge, I seek out friends and experts and situations for guidance. I have them proofread for professional, ethnic, gender, and cultural accuracy. I ask them outright, "Does this ring true?" This is just standard operating procedure of being a good writer and a conscientious person. Watch. Ask. Listen. Double-check. I've done it for all of my books.

Do you consider yourself a comic writer?

I never set out to be funny. I don't see myself as a humorist. It's just that I'm constantly struck by the absurdities of the world. They're everywhere. And I do have this reflexive impulse to balance comedy and tragedy. If something is funny, I find myself instinctively highlighting the sadness or pain within it. And if something is tragic, I find myself writing about it with an eye to whatever is ridiculous.

What's next?

The same as it always is: Clean the entire house, take a nap, then get back to work.