

She, You, I – Book Club Guide

Please note that if you haven't already read the book, there are some spoilers in the discussion points below.

1. What is your view of Simon and his violence? To what extent do you think it was caused by his wartime experiences, including his head injury? Does this change your perception of his behaviour?

2. A plane flew in, a day bomber.... the plane had no undercarriage. It would land on its belly, on the gun turret slung underneath, crushing, unless he was lucky, the gunner trapped inside. Maisie had heard people talk of these crashes, of the pilots who killed one of their crew to save the rest. Maisie imagined them now, scudding in behind the veil of fire. The gunner's screams, the pilot's guilt.

This was just one of the many emergency landings Maisie would have witnessed. What impact do you think it would have had on an 18-year-old?

3. "He nearly killed me, Mam." Maisie put her head in her hands as if that would obliterate the memories. "He nearly killed me. And all because I asked him, 'What's a floozy?'" She felt herself a child again, curled up under the bed, behind the tin trunk, felt the fear that she'd buried so carefully erupt through the layers of failed forgetting burst out and chill the day.

This is the first time that Maisie explores her feelings about her childhood abuse. It comes years after the event. Are you surprised that it takes her so long to talk about it? Do you have friends whose families were affected by domestic abuse? What was the impact on children in the family and were they given support? What were the long-term consequences for the children? Are you surprised that Maisie felt unable to discuss it with anyone else?

4. They stood lined up across the grave in the autumnal gloom, as distant from her in their thirties as they'd been on that bright day in Cambridge. Guy took off his glasses and rubbed them, then put them back on again and smiled wanly at her. She wondered if they still thought all it took to get by was a bit of what they called breeding and a splash of money, and whether that was, in fact, still the case.

This event, in 1958, is one of the points in the story where Maisie perceives most acutely the class difference between herself and Jeremy and his friends. How much do you think things have changed since then?

5. *“This dress is something different. This dress will change the world,”* says Hsiao Ling of Princess Di’s wedding dress.

Do you remember watching Princess Diana’s wedding? Did it seem to you that it was an era-defining moment? Does it take on more significance viewed through the prism of history?

6. *“Not quite what you expected, back in the day?”* She’d not managed to tame her voice, though. *Still the cheese grater. “You guys did a great job on my dress, shame about the man.”* Was Calypso a product of her times? Would her life have been different if she’d belonged to a different generation? Do you see her as a villain or a victim?

7. Tseng Hsiao Ling has an extraordinary family history of loss and resilience. What are your views of her story?

8. Do you think Isla’s troubles are down to nurture or nature? What impact do you think her mother’s emotional distance and her father’s abandonment had on her?

9. “You,” is Julia’s story about her sister Isla. But how much is it about Isla, and how much about Julia’s emotional awakening?

10; *“You talked about Calypso’s rift with Aunt Connie over Dominic, and I reminded you of mother’s bust-up with Connie over Hsiao Ling. And of course, we talked about Father. That part of our past seemed too distant to hurt either of us. We were both successful, we had nothing to prove, we were invulnerable, so I thought.”*

Julia shows she loves her sister. But how well does she understand her? Is Julia an unreliable narrator?

11. *“That’s an acute observation,”* she says. *“It goes to the heart of who I am.”* She tells me about her work on a food project in New York. It makes me feel inadequate. She talks about her co-workers Finn and Precious, and it’s a while before I realise they’re her parents.

Heartfelt impresses Skye with her worldly wise cool. But to what extent do you think that Skye is the stronger character of the two by the time she returns home from Edinburgh?

12. *There’s cold hatred in his eyes. They fix on me, but they see Maisie. I want to scream, “No, not me, I’m not her.”* But then he says, *“That’s why I killed him.”*

Did you see that coming? Do you think Wee Jimmy’s perception of Simon’s death is accurate?

13. At the end of the book, in a lull during the pandemic lockdown, Skye drops out of University and sets up a coffee cart with her boyfriend, Kit Ying. Do you know people who took stock of their lives and did something different as a result of their experiences during that time? What do you think the longer-term consequences of the pandemic will be, especially for young people?

Thematic discussion points

1. To what extent do the three points of view in the book, third, second and first person, reflect the growing agency among the women?

2. *He was a hero, much-decorated, fought at Gallipoli and the Somme.* Maisie's father, Simon.

He looked too unaware of himself to be a hero, more like a lad going home after a hard day's work - Maisie's first love, Roland Roseberry

"I only did it for you.... So's I could be your hero." Wee Jimmy

"The type of man who's so bloody brilliant, he practically won the whole bloody war single-handed. A complete bloody hero. That type of man." Jeremy talking about Alan Turing.

"Well, my grandfather was a war hero too. But he never came home." Hsiao Ling describing her missing grandfather, Chang Chiao Feng.

Discuss some of the different approaches to heroism set out above.

3. *The wind was blowing, the east wind that they said tore in from Siberia across the North Sea, scudding over the tops of the trees that pitched and tossed and protested, but held firm. Walking beneath them, she could hear the wind, and if she looked up, she could see the turmoil it caused, but wasn't touched by it.* Rendlesham Forest airbase.

Outside, the sky was black. No moon, no stars. At the far end of the garden, I could hear the wind, see the dark shapes of the trees flail, protesting the bitter gale, their branches writhing like desperate arms. The turbulence was disorientating. It made me feel sick. A squall of sleet stung my face. A storm in Maisie's garden in Surrey.

The grass is still bouncy with dawn dew. Birds sing into emptiness. The air here has a purity that makes you think that because you can see and hear and smell things more clearly, you can understand them better too. The riverside where Skye has her coffee cart.

How far does the natural world reflect the inner life of the characters?

4. This is perhaps the biggest discussion point. There are different types of discrimination and disadvantage in the novel. Do they speak to your own life experience? Do they bring any fresh perspectives or insights to your views or to the wider debate?