

Introduction

Nancy writes medical newsletters for a living, but she's begun to write a novel. Her book is based loosely on an important decision her father made in his youth, one that shaped his character from that point on, and also influenced his daughter as she made decisions about the course of her own life. This isn't just a story she wants to write; it's a story she *must* write, to honor her father and to work through her grief over his death.

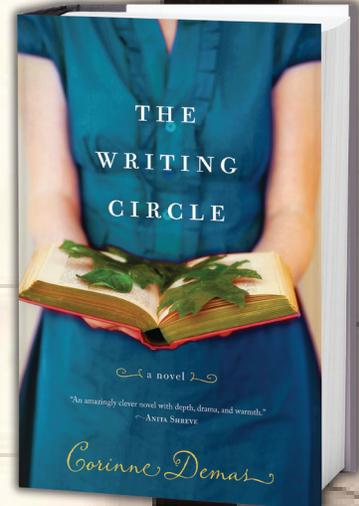
So when she's asked to join a writing group consisting of several prominent authors, she swallows her reservations about her own talent and brings the first chapter of her novel to share. She has reason to be intimidated: Gillian is a reputed poet rumored to be a contender for a Pulitzer, Chris earns his living writing thrillers, Bernard and Virginia—once married but now amicably divorced—are both scholars, and a biographer and historian, respectively. Only Adam, the youngest member of the group and an aspiring novelist, shares Nancy's lack of literary reputation, but his evident ability has kept him a member of this elite group, the Leopardi Circle.

While Nancy is officially welcomed into the group, it's not the most comfortable fit. Gillian, in particular, seems both amused by Nancy's presence and piqued that the newest member is less than willing to take her proffered advice. Chris, too, makes it known that he might have preferred a different kind of writer to join their ranks. And the Leopardi Circle has its secrets: romantic entanglements and professional and personal betrayals threaten to disrupt the group's concord almost as soon as Nancy has joined. Nancy, in particular, will not emerge from their meetings unscathed.

In alternate chapters told from the perspective of each character, *The Writing Circle* is a novel that plumbs the literary world and exposes its pretensions and imperfections while also examining basic human nature and its impulses and desires. The narrative moves quickly and convincingly before coming to its stunning and unexpected conclusion. In this way, Corinne Demas's novel is part mystery, part romance, and part poem, examining with grace and skill the risks we take when we share ourselves professionally and personally.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did you think of the novel's structure? What were the benefits of receiving the story via alternating chapters from the perspectives of several characters? What were some of the drawbacks?
2. One of the novel's main subjects is fidelity. Discuss what Demas is saying about fidelity via her characters and their actions—not just concerning sexual relationships, but with regard to friends, family, peers, and one's sense of self. In particular, examine the lives of the members of the Leopardi Circle and the role fidelity plays in each of their lives.
3. Discuss jealousy as a subject of the novel, and the comment Demas is making about the nature of jealousy in our lives. How many kinds of jealousy are in evidence here? Is there any jealousy that might be considered healthy? Which character or characters appealed to you the most, and why? Whose perspective did you sympathize or identify with the least?
4. Consider the homes of the characters and the way they echo the various personality traits of their owners. What did each home reveal about its owner? How, too, was the landscape used to parallel or reveal aspects of each character's emotions?
5. Would you label Gillian a sociopath? Consider her behavior throughout the novel—is she consistently self-serving and remorseless? Does she have any redeeming qualities? In particular, discuss the last chapter, when it's revealed that she doesn't love anyone, but that she believes she came closest to loving Paul. Is there any irony in a poet being an amoral person?
6. Compare and contrast Gillian's character to that of Nancy, and discuss how the two women work as opposites or counterparts, morally, professionally, and emotionally.
7. Compare and contrast, too, the various partnerships in the novel: Gillian and Jerry; Rachel and Paul; Virginia and Bernard; Gillian and Adam; Aimee and Bernard; Nancy and Oates; Nancy and Chris; and Nancy and Adam. Discuss each relationship and what Demas may be saying about the nature of partnerships via these characters.
8. Fatherhood is another important subject in the novel. Compare and contrast Chris's actions and attitude toward being a father with Bernard's, who becomes a father again very late in life. Discuss both men in light of Nancy's father, who is held up as a superior example. What does this novel reveal about men and their roles in the lives of their children?
9. Were you surprised to discover that Gillian had plagiarized Nancy's novel? Do you believe Gillian truly didn't think she had stolen Nancy's work? What was your reaction when you learned that Gillian had slept with the professor who accused her of plagiarizing her senior thesis?
10. Similarly, did the end of the book surprise you? What parts of the book, aside from the preface, point to this conclusion? Was the ending a satisfying resolution to the novel?
11. Discuss how the preface shaped your reading of the novel as you made your way through the book—were you thinking about the possible car accident?
12. Giacomo Leopardi, from whom the members of the writing circle took their name, was a nineteenth-century Italian Romantic poet who wrote about the misery and suffering of the world. How might his name contribute some symbolism to the book, then, based on the lives of its characters?



A Discussion with Corinne Demas

- 1. The *Writing Circle* has a unique narrative structure. What gave you the idea to tell your story in this way, and what problems did you run into while telling it? Was it difficult to alternate between the different perspectives?**

I was interested in the way different pieces of a story come together to make a whole. In *The Writing Circle* each character has a life outside the group, and many of the things that happen in the world beyond the group end up having an impact on the group itself. I toyed with the idea of using a first-person narrator for each of the characters, but the limited omniscient third-person narrator enabled me to show things to the reader that the characters themselves might not be aware of.

What made it hard to alternate between the different perspectives was that I got so involved in the life of each individual character, I hated to have to move on to the next!

- 2. You write in a variety of genres—you've published a memoir, collections of short stories, a book of poems, and numerous titles for children and young adults, and written a play that's been produced. What is your favorite genre to write in? What are the drawbacks and the benefits of practicing so many different kinds of writing?**

I love writing novels because they give me the largest canvas to work on. They really become a second life for me. So far, I haven't discovered drawbacks to practicing different kinds of writing—in fact, I've found many benefits. When you write picture books you have to practice economy, and you always need to be aware of your specific audience. When you write poetry you think about the importance of individual words—not just their meaning, but their sound. Of course, the fact that I write poetry gave me insight into my character Gillian. The real pleasure of having different genres to choose among is that they offer creative variety. I could never work on two novels at the same time, but while I'm charging along, immersed in the complexities of a novel, a children's book or a poem is a refreshing change of pace.

- 3. You teach at Mount Holyoke College, where you're a professor of English. What kind of writing advice do you give to your students?**

In my short story writing seminar, the most important thing I can do as a teacher is encourage my students to read. I want them to appreciate the history of the genre and be inspired by the tremendous variety of styles.

As for technical advice, I always urge my students to read their work aloud and use their ears to help them with their revisions. In *The Writing Circle*, Chris tells Gillian, "You've been teaching too many writing workshops, doing the old 'show me don't tell me' routine." In fact, "show me don't tell me" is the most useful advice any fiction writer can take to heart.

- 4. Do you find writing groups like the Leopardi Circle helpful, in general? Do you belong to one yourself?**

Writing groups can certainly be helpful. A lot depends on the group (Is their criticism constructive?) as well as the individual writer (Is he or she ready to listen to feedback?). Writing is a lonely business, and meeting with others who are toiling away at similar enterprises can be a lifesaver.

I have belonged to writing groups for many years, and I love them!

- 5. What are you working on currently? What will we see next from you in bookstores?**

I'm currently working on a new novel called *The Married House*. It's a story about a family, set in an old house on Cape Cod.



Matthew Rodrig

I have three new children's books on their way. *Halloween Surprise* (a sequel to my *Valentine Surprise*) will be out in the fall. *Pirates Go to School*, a picture book in rhyme, and *Downsized*, a middle grade novel, should be out next spring.

