

From Maribeth Fischer

There is no end to the tragedies and losses this pandemic has brought to us, but there are also numerous small gifts (just read our “Dispatches from a Pandemic” to learn of some of these—under Events on the Guild website). This online book club, a true experiment, was one such gift for me. I loved the questions that the other moderators, Jen Epler, Renay Regardie, and Colleen Scott came up with. They were questions I never would have thought to ask and I learned so much about writing in general, and about this book in particular because of the thinking, mulling over, and pondering that those questions forced me to do. I said to numerous people that I never wanted to have a book club again without great questions from a number of people to guide us.

So there was that. But then the answers! I felt like this was a mini MFA class. I learned things about character development that I had not considered in thirty years of teaching writing. It might seem obvious, but it never occurred to me until someone brought it up here, that one of the reasons we might like a character is because other characters (that we admire in the novel) like that character. Of course! And yet I’d never considered this.

I’m grateful for the care and thoughtfulness our 13 book club participants took in answering the questions. And to the moderators: I had such fun working with you all. I’m hoping we can do this again. I would also love volunteers to “moderate” future book club events.

Question 1 posed by and responses compiled by Maribeth Fischer

One of the most frequent criticisms from readers is that whining, negative characters who feel like victims are not characters with whom we want to spend time. Readers don’t like them. And yet, we have to give our characters obstacles, don’t we? How do we do this without turning the reader away? Lily King might have the answer, for in *Writers & Lovers*, the character of Casey struggles with money, relationship issues, work problems, doesn’t like where she lives (granted, it’s a potting shed), is grieving and can’t write. And yet, my feeling is that readers do not see Casey as a whining, negative character.

Question: What is it that makes Casey a strong character whom we like, care about and are rooting for? Was there a specific incident where you were aware of liking her, rooting for her? Something in the writing (aside from the ending) that kept this book from feeling depressing?

A few things stand out in the responses. First, twelve of the 14 respondents liked Casey and were rooting for her from the beginning. There were big reasons: *She has a dream for her life and holds on to it*, wrote Renay. *Despite real problems, she is so disciplined*, Karen commented. And a number of us agreed with this, citing how hard she worked, how she never gave up. Jo-Ann added, *We relate to her self-deprecating inner voice that we all have at some point, no matter our station in life*. And from Jo: *Most of all, I liked the way she answered to no one but herself*.

There were also specific reasons: for Colleen, rooting for Casey began on pg. 2 when Adam treated her with disrespect, saying something snide. *After he said that, I was hooked: in my mind she had to succeed*. Susan mentioned how even though Casey was in debt and basically poor, she was willing to use her waitressing tips to help Oscar's kids buy his lunch. A number of readers also admired Casey's discipline in her writing, specifically commenting on the fact that she rose early to write. In this respect, I couldn't help but wonder if we saw in Casey something we want for ourselves.

For me, rooting for Casey began on pg.5 in the scene with the geese. Casey's ability to love something so simple and to feel such hope—despite her grief—was all I needed.

A second specific moment that I marked was on pg. 54 at the book signing for Oscar when the caterer asks Casey if she'd like a prosciutto-wrapped fig. Here is Casey's response:

"Oh thanks so much," I say, trying to convey my bond with her. I take a fig from the tray and a napkin from her other hand. It bugs me when people don't take the napkins."

Even in this "throw-away" moment that is absolutely *not* important to the plot, we see Casey trying to be kind.

All the responses serve as a reminder that regardless of a book's plot, characters need to love and care about things—big and little (*When she was at work, she gave it her all, carried her fair share, cared about the way the tables looked, gave good service to her customers*, Jo wrote). Many readers mentioned Casey's kindness to Oscar's kids and for two readers, TaraLee and Gail, it wasn't really until Casey interacted with Oscar's children that Gail and TaraLee warmed to her. The lesson for me is, again, to give our characters chances to be kind and good, to care, even if it's only about little things. I've been looking for more opportunities in my own work as a result of seeing the specific examples pointed out here.

In addition to what Casey did or didn't do, Colleen pointed out that Casey was surrounded by people who loved her (Harry, Muriel, Caleb), something TaraLee echoed: *I also liked her because other characters cared about her so much*. I had never thought about this before and it felt so

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true—and wise—and something to remember as writers. If others in the book don't seem to care about the character and root for her, how can we ask this of our readers?

But what also mattered a great deal was not just who Casey was as a person, but how King wrote about her: *The writing is very witty, often funny*, Renay wrote. *Her travails are revealed in a more or less matter of fact way*, Judy said. And from Susan: *There is a difference between whining and stating the facts of your life*. Colleen also commented on the short chapters, and Jo mentioned the fast pace of the restaurant scenes. I'd never considered either of these in terms of keeping the character from sounding whinny, but yes, it's almost as if there wasn't space or time to wallow.

In the end, reading these measured, thoughtful and specific answers gave me lessons in character development that I am now using. Thank you!

The Responses

Renay Regardie

I liked Casey from the beginning. She is sympathetic, vulnerable, yet very feisty and witty. You want to give her a nudge, make her win. She has a dream for her life and holds on to it, despite dire circumstances.

Early on (pg. 12 or 13) when she recounts how her roommates, who all want a writing life, abandoned it for a conventional life, financial security, I rooted for her all the more.

The writing is very witty, often funny. The way Casey goes back and forth over things appeals to me. She may be down, but she's not giving up. Honestly, I just felt she was trying so hard to figure out her direction, her life, that I never felt depressed (although I did often want to give her a good kick in the ass).

Judy Catterton

I think it's because Casey herself is not whining. She is not throwing a "pity party" and asking us to attend. Her travails are revealed in a more or less matter-of-fact way.

Colleen Scott

The initial reason I was rooting for Casey didn't have to do with what she said; it had to do with what Adam said in regards to Casey's writing on pg. 2: *"I just find it amazing that you think you have something to say."* This guy lives in a house with an extra car and comforts Casey doesn't have. He's unhappy in his own life (we learn he's going through a divorce). He insults Casey with this comment as if she couldn't possibly be a writer. After he said that, I was hooked: in my mind she had to succeed, she had to write her book and move out of the shed.

Casey's life was hard, riding in the rain on her bike, the waitressing, the constant fear that a bill collector was going to knock on the door. She didn't give up; she kept writing. I think this is why it didn't feel depressing to me. She kept going, got on the bike, went into work, sat at her little desk. Writing is hard and lonely and yes, it can be depressing but Casey had people like Harry, Muriel, and Caleb in her life who cared about her and cared what

happened to her. Knowing this kept it from being too depressing for me. Also, the layout of the short chapters moved the story along quickly enough so I didn't feel there was too much time to wallow in anything unpleasant.

Linda Federman

I liked Casey because she described her feelings of panic and anxiety without sounding self-pitying. I was especially aware of rooting for her when she went for the job interview and described how even the clothes she borrowed for it had taken her well outside her comfort zone. It felt like she was working her way through her trauma; in a way, it always seemed like she was swimming towards the surface.

Jo-Ann Baca

We like Casey and are rooting for her for several reasons. We relate to her self-deprecating inner voice that we all have at some point, no matter our station in life. I specifically related to her in two ways: I worked my way through college waitressing and have strong memories of the mundane, repetitious, and detailed work, yet King shows us that it gives Casey a window into the often selfish yet amusing behavior of the general public. Casey treats the job with a service-oriented responsibility. Second, my mother died when I was 21 years old. It was sudden and unexpected. Watching Casey grieve and long to discuss her life with her mother, wishing she could know so much more, is deeply personal and relatable to me. All throughout the writing, King does not let Casey give up on her dreams or take the easy way out of anything.

Karen Schneiderman

I think we root for Casey because the reasons for her anxiety and exhaustion feel real. Her mother's sudden death, with no chance for closure; a despicable father; and overwhelming debt—I just felt sad for her. Despite real problems, she is so disciplined. Getting up early to write and working so hard at a job for which she is way over-qualified so that she will have time to pursue her dream of writing. I admired her. I admired how smart she was. How well-read she was. I wrote down the names of some of the books she mentions in her interviews as her favorites, hoping that I will find time to read them. I loved how kind she was to Oscar's children. How she spent the time to teach them how to shuffle cards. It made me want to be more patient in teaching my granddaughters, approximately the same age as Oscar's boys, to shuffle and play "Spit."

Jo Balistreri

I liked hanging around Casey for so many reasons. She was a free spirit, yet responsible. She'd traveled as she pleased, yet when she returned from Barcelona, she faced her debts head on. She was nobody's fool and played only herself. I loved the restaurant scenes, the fast pace that kept her from wallowing in her real grief over her mother and the take-all boyfriend.

When she was at work, she gave it her all, carried her fair share, cared about the way the tables looked, gave good service to her customers. She was smart, keeping the orders in her head. And she was wise. "People are crazy with their planning" (pg. 127). She never owned a

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planner or a date book. That was impressive to me. The banter was great fun. Casey was fast with the quip and it was always spot-on.

She was a true writer, showing up every day even when it didn't go well. She was all in, thought constantly about writing, about different characters in books that were more real to her than real people. She'd think about how an author could do that. She was extremely well read and had a grasp on various books that was insightful. I loved that she loved books.

A favorite scene early on was the way she responded to Oscar's little boy, stopping what she was doing when she saw his mouth twist. *He's only practiced these words and doesn't have any others*, she realizes (pg. 102). The dialogue is terrific with Oscar and his sons. I enjoyed her wink at the boys, their conspiracy behind Oscar's back. Most of all I liked the way she answered to no one but herself. She seemed fearless when push came to shove. She persevered against terrific odds, and let herself be vulnerable: the geese, the boys, Luke.

Gail Comorat

I honestly didn't like Casey in the very beginning. I don't know if it was because I didn't like boyfriend Luke or the way she talked about her job and her seeming lack of ambition about writing. The only thing I liked was the restaurant and her friend Muriel. I felt like Casey was someone I'd met at a cocktail party and didn't like because of something she said. I went along for the ride because my friends liked her and I wanted to see why. The first time she became interesting to me was in the chapter about the writers and their dead mothers. And then soon after when Oscar and his kids come to brunch, I softened to her because of the way she dealt with the boys.

Susan Morse

There is a difference between whining and stating the facts of your life. Lily King immediately sets up her protagonist as witty, insightful and focused on completing her novel. The loss of her mother (and her father in another way), the money problems and relationships with men (maybe, they are a distraction from the larger problems) are part of the total picture; however, she never deviates from her main goal. She thought about people who were starting their writing careers with her, and how they chose money-secure careers and left writing behind. *I think of all the people playing roles, getting further and further away from themselves, from what moves them, what stirs them all up inside. And I think of my novel on Muriel's mail table* (pg.147).

Casey is kind and generous, emotionally and financially. It didn't phase her to take the money from her tips to cover the bill for Oscar's birthday lunch and she needed every dime for herself (pg.112).

You know as a friend, Casey would be there for you despite the turmoil in her life. Muriel is a mirror image. She "makes the time" to critique the manuscript, and helps Casey with what to wear to an interview. These are the big and little things that constitute friendship.

Casey is sometimes mystified by the actions of others but she is not a door mat. She knows when to stop, when to say "no" and how to protect herself. She cannot go out on a date

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with a “writer” *who’s written eleven and half pages in three years. That kind of thing is contagious* (pg.72).

Her father and stepmother show up at Iris and want to buy her mother’s ring. She does not entertain the idea; the ring represented *the sky and the stars* to her and her mother. Casey would not sell the universe for anything (pgs. 180-181).

The male relationships correspond with the stages of Casey’s development. Luke and the bees (the birds and the bees), lust, youthfulness.

Oscar: the dark side, the father parallel. He was a father and did seem devoted to his sons; however, his main devotion was to himself. He was presumptuous, vain, snide (about Silas and his work), and he never asked to read Casey’s manuscript.

Again, in a show of her protagonist’s strength, Casey said, *other people’s families are a weakness of mine* (pg.112). Oscar “represented” the family man, but in fact Casey only saw part of him from the beginning (at the book signing). She is well aware that it is not a wholesome relationship and she ends it.

King presents us with Silas, who is a better match for Casey; however, the reader is left with the feeling at the end of the novel that he is another chapter, an important chapter, but not “the one.”

Casey remains true to her core:

I think back on all the rooms in all the cities and towns where I wrote the pieces of this book, all the doubt and days of failure but also that knot of stubbornness that’s still inside me (pg.174).

All I want is to write fiction. I am a drain on the system, dragging around my debts and my dreams. It’s all I’ve wanted (pg. 250).

King gives us a protagonist who is determined, resilient, ultimately successful and remains true to herself and her moral code.

Taralee Morgan

Casey certainly has a long list of issues she could complain about! She didn’t wallow in self-pity for long, however, and continued to focus on present matters. I started liking her when she was nice to Oscar’s children in the restaurant. I liked how well she treated them despite her own disappointing childhood and dating life. She seemed to hold high standards for herself and others in relationships. I also liked her because other characters cared about her so much. She still remained capable of forming strong relationships with people no matter what happened to her. I felt respect for her when she left Oscar, knowing she would be better off on her own than to stay with someone who could not support her success in the future.

Sandy Donnelly

She never once goes into the why me blame game. She steps over the adversity and plows on regardless of her self-doubt and grief.

Jen Epler

I never grew tired of, or impatient with, Casey's predicament, her feelings, or her actions. I think it is because she owns her feelings (the whole range of them) even when they are unpopular, or in contrast to what others might want and need from her. For example, she doesn't cave to her father when he arrives at the restaurant. She doesn't go to a wedding she can't afford. She doesn't respond to Oscar until she's good and ready. She savors moments of grief (singing to the geese), opens herself up to hurt (with Luke), faces her worst fears and shame (remembering her father's actions in the locker room). She hesitates when others might dive in, and dives in when others might hesitate. She's patient with her emotions and her timeline for processing them. I admire that. And I admire how Lily King allowed a character to luxuriate in the messiness of her world.

"...I admire how Lily King allowed a character to luxuriate in the messiness of her world."

—Jen Epler

Sherri Wright

While her work and money situation was depressing, I appreciated how hard she worked and how determined she was to both get out of debt and also to finish her book. She was real in her affection for those little boys. I almost wanted her to go with Oscar just for Jasper and John.

Question 2 posed by and responses compiled by Renay Regardie

Consider the backstory. Casey has been estranged from her father since high school when he was dismissed for a voyeurism incident. Casey has had several unsatisfactory relationships. We find out that Casey is a nickname her father gave her for the poem “Casey at the Bat.” *I was named for a guy who struck out when it mattered most*, she says to Oscar. She submits her novel under her real name, Camila.

Question: How important is this backstory to Casey’s sense of self, her self-esteem? Why did she continue to identify herself as Casey? Why did she use her real name, Camila, in submitting her novel to a potential agent? What is Lily King saying about identity and growth?

It’s not surprising that everyone agreed that the backstory, re: Casey’s father, was critical to understanding who Casey, at age 31, is. Colleen noted, *the backstory is very important to see the growth in her self-esteem*. And it is essential to understand Casey’s sense of self, said Jo. *(Casey) is a walking compendium of her past experiences*, Jen writes.

I felt that, as a teenager, Casey tried desperately to please her father, and thus ensure his love, a love that he couldn’t fulfill. Casey’s success could not substitute for his failure to fulfill his dreams. Casey tells us on pg. 232, *it took me a while to understand that my wins on the golf course, no matter how hard he strived for them, only made him feel worse*. The Peeping Tom incident is a major betrayal to Casey, and she turns away from her father. It’s at this point that Casey loses much of her sense of self. However, Sandy points out that *despite her father’s perversions, he did help to establish her desire to achieve*.

Casey identified herself as a loser for much of her life, a thought that came up again and again. Colleen says, *Casey was a nickname given to her by her dad...a character in a poem who struck out*.

Sherri brought up an interesting point. *I wondered if her discovery about her father influenced the type of men she was drawn to*. I think that Luke and Oscar both had qualities, good and bad, that she found in her father.

This is a coming-of-age story, and it’s essential to know where you come from to help define where you are going, or hope to go. Casey (uh, Camila) is on the cusp, moving into adulthood, and it’s towards the end of the book that she sees herself as a full person, not the loser label her father pinned on her. Maribeth says, *The biggest statement King makes about identity is when Casey uses her real name on her writing...the most important thing in her life...belongs to Camila not Casey*. You could say “Casey” represented “loser,” Karen says. Linda sums it up: *She claims her name when she starts to claim her life back*.

King slips in Casey’s real name, Camila, so softly that you could easily miss it. On pg. 225, Jennifer Lin, the editor, calls and says, *“I really loved (the book). I think it’s extraordinary, Camila.” Camila. I forgot I’d put my real name on the manuscript*.

Jen says, *toward the end of the book she is ready to be Camilla though I had never thought about her name, and that she changed it.*

The subtleness is on purpose. The book takes us from Casey as an insecure, struggling young adult to a maturing Camila, a person who can now move forward with hope. She's still somewhat unsure, but she's more ready to face hurdles, the highs and lows, in her life.

The Responses

Colleen Scott

I think knowing the backstory is very important to see the growth in her self-esteem especially in the scene where her father and his wife come to eat at the restaurant and he asks for the ring. Casey does not give in and give him the ring. She keeps it for herself even though he berates her for 'giving up' her golfing career and scoffs at her degrees. She does not 'give up' the ring.

I think Casey purposely chose to use Camila in [her writing] submission because the nickname Casey came from a character in a poem where it is well known that the character struck out. It was also a nickname given to her by her dad. Maybe this was her way of distancing herself from what her dad wanted for her (the golfing career) and from the idea of 'striking out.' He chose that name for her when he was guiding her golf career. She returns to the name Camila, the one she was given at birth because now she is guiding her own life.

Linda Federman

Casey owned her past and let it define her, all the while feeling as though it were a temporary state. Even her job choice has a transience about it—it doesn't provide longevity or benefits (later she learns that benefits are available but she was never offered them) and the tables turn over every hour or so. It's like she has a place to go, a place where she can lose her thoughts (or drown them out) in the hustle and bustle, but the interaction with each diner is temporary. I think she claims her name when she starts to claim her life back, and starts to heal from her mother's death. She literally earns back her name and stops dragging around the weight of her past. She matures, and that is reflected in all aspects of her life.

Jo-Ann Baca

The backstory is essential! Casey, as in "At the Bat," is the nickname her father thoughtlessly, if not heartlessly, gives her in reference to striking out and failing. The fact that she still uses it illustrates how much she struggles with her own sense of self. She often demonstrates low self-esteem and anxiety. She hasn't found either the inner or outer voice she needs to stand up for herself in everyday life and to finish her writing. Her mother was the one who called her Camila and it was part of a special bond between them. She doesn't feel worthy to use that name because she hasn't yet become Camila, doesn't want to lose her connection with her mom, and has not yet fully grieved. King is telling the coming-of-age-story through Casey, who needs to experience the obstacles

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more fully."*

—Jo-Ann Baca

in her life to realize who she is meant to be and to learn that she is strong enough to overcome her challenges. She doesn't use her own name, Camila, until she becomes herself, more fully.

Karen Schneiderman

I guess Casey was somewhat beaten down by her father's estimation of her, but in the meantime, she has had a lot of success in life. Being number two in the country at her age for golf, getting a full scholarship, winning awards—and she is obviously able to attract guys pretty easily—even if she gets dumped sometimes. I see her with a lot of anxiety—even to the point of panic attacks, but in her soul—to me—she has confidence in her abilities.

You could say 'Casey' represented 'loser' and she felt proud when she turned the book in. She had finished it and felt good about it. It was a little sappy to me, but I guess it meant shaking loose the loser role for herself.

Jo Balistreri

The backstory is essential to understand Casey's sense of self. Just as she resigned herself to playing golf even when her dad lost interest, the story of her father's voyeurism clinched her concept of self; instead of revealing the disgusting story, she filed it away.

She was Casey until she wasn't. Finishing the novel, she signed her name, Camilla. The change in names show the change in growth and how we label ourselves is how we see ourselves. She no longer saw herself as a quitter. Or merely a waitress.

As an aside, accepting the name Casey (a limitation in some way), was a place of growth as well. She constantly pushed against that boundary of quitter again subconsciously.

Gail Comorat

Her self-esteem is so low in the opening chapters that she can't write. I think that when she finally finished the book, she thought of herself in a different way. She saw herself as someone with potential (although she still doubted that).

Susan Morse

The back story remains central in Casey's identification. King signals the reader that Casey's past is unconsciously present and represented by the protagonist Clara, who Casey created.

When Muriel and Casey are discussing the manuscript: *She [Muriel] says Clara is so particular, but she's also the embodiment of women undone by the history of men. She [Muriel] gives me credit for all kinds of things I hadn't been thinking about in any sort of ideological way.*

Muriel advises Casey to write the rape scene; it is too important to happen 'offstage.'

Casey: *I tried. It didn't work.*

Muriel: *Try again...use those feelings, use all of them.*

Casey goes home and writes the scene. And realizes: *You don't realize how much effort you've put into covering things up until you try to dig them out* (pg. 168).

Yes, King is showing the reader that Casey's past is (subconsciously) very much present.

Maybe she continues to use the name Casey that her toxic father gave to her because in day-to-day relationships 'Casey' has been her 'call name' for years; however, in the part of her that is the core, her soul, she is Camila. Her writing comes from her soul.

Her true identity and her growth through all of the horrors reveals itself when she writes her real name on her manuscript and submits it.

Taralee Morgan

Casey quit golf competitions just when all of her and her father's work was paying off. She achieved a high ranking and was admitted to Duke University on a golf scholarship. I think keeping her name the same as someone who struck out at the worst time kept her from making the same mistake with her writing. She had been at bat writing a story for years and wanted to continue trying until she hit a homerun with a lucrative publishing deal. Keeping her name Casey helped her remember her past and motivated her to not make the same decision in the future when writing became difficult. When she finally became successful, she changed her name to Camila to indicate she was no longer defined by her golf failures but by her writing success. It also seemed to indicate she was identifying more with the passionate person her mother was and less with the overbearing and ambitious person her father was.

Sandy Donnelly

Regardless of her father's perversions he did help to establish her self-esteem and desire to achieve. She carried that name and identity until she finally completed something totally separate and beyond him and could acknowledge her being as someone deserving of Camila.

Jen Epler

For Casey, backstory is everything. She is a walking compendium of her past experiences, all of which she tries to hold tight, catalog, review, understand but not completely accept or embrace (yet). Her backstory simultaneously erodes and builds her self-esteem. It is a Herculean task to keep her memories and impressions that result from her experiences from falling out, disappearing, or becoming irrelevant before she's ready to let them go. Finally, toward the end of the book, she gains traction. She is ready to be Camilla (and hence the name change), though honestly, I had never thought about her name (and that she changed it) until this question was posed. Yikes!

Sherri Wright

I wondered if her discovery about her father influenced the type of men she was drawn to. Maybe Lily King included this back story about her father to draw contrast with the strong affection she held for her mother. And to emphasize how alone she was. Going from waitress to author was the right time to take on a real adult identity her real name.

Maribeth Fischer

I love this question, because I was so focused on the mom and the grief, which was beautifully captured, that I never really considered the relationship to the father. One of the

things that I admire most about King's writing is how much she packs into few words. Casey's relationship with her dad doesn't take up a lot of space on the page, yet it takes up a huge amount of space in Casey's head. Even in little ways: driving to her job interview at the beautiful school, before she's even in the door, Casey sees a guy on a tractor mowing and says, *that could be my dad. I can't work here.* A short declarative statement, but it shows how what happened with her dad is right there beneath the surface.

The biggest statement King makes about identity is when Casey uses her real name on her writing, which is the most important thing in her life, the thing she is living in near-poverty to continue doing, the thing she is waking early to accomplish, the thing that she can't fathom abandoning though writing makes no practical sense and fills her with doubt and fear (but also great joy). All of that belongs to Camila not Casey, and she does not allow her father near this vulnerable, fragile part of herself. I love that. I love what it says about Casey and about how she fights to protect her writing.

But she doesn't (can't) completely erase her father from her life. Perhaps, too, her father is a part of her connection to Oscar. Like her, his children have no mother, and though Oscar rearranged his life to make his kids a priority, like her father, his need to take up so much space in his kids' lives is one of the red flags. We also see how her dad's ability to do something inappropriate (vastly inappropriate!) and have others somehow turn the other eye, plays out in Casey's refusal to do this with Luke. Once she knows he is married, she cuts him off, though it was painful to do so and a huge part of her didn't want to.

Writing this answer, I am aware of how easily King could have made the dad the bad parent and the mom the good parent, but of course, the mom left her husband and daughter for another man...and the dad, for all his awfulness, was the parent who stayed and cared. I could go on and on but what I am realizing is how crucial the backstory is to the decisions Casey makes in the present with each of the men in her life. And I am thinking too that this book is as much about Casey's coming to terms with her parents as it is about her writing or her finding love, both of which are also connected to her parents in important ways.

Question 3 posed by and responses compiled by Jen Epler

No surprise that in *Writers & Lovers*, Lily King includes a lot of characters who are writers. I found it interesting how she chose to portray them. There's Luke, the grieving bee-centric poet who seems to take what (and who) he can, when he can, to produce ovation-inducing work at the Red Barn residency. There's Muriel, Casey's conduit for all things literary (and otherwise), who, despite being *knee-deep in manuscripts to review*, takes the time to read Casey's novel and offer a spot-on critique that sets Casey on the path to "success." There's Silas, an under-the-radar writer with issues. And finally, there's Oscar, also grief stricken, but less sympathetic. Already published, he's on a different circuit—workshop leader, cocktail party book-signer ("Carry on, Alice"), who laments his age in comparison to crowd size at a bookstore reading. And of course, there's Casey. Broken, stubborn, and deeply vulnerable (she is discussed in another question so I'll leave her at that).

Question: How accurate is King's portrayal of the writing life as you understand it? Was there a specific moment that rang especially true in terms of the portrayal of a writer?

Overwhelmingly, readers thought King did a good job portraying the writing life, especially when it came to Casey. Jo said, *reading Casey's story I felt it was mine. Writing is hard...starting over again and again.* Karen echoed Casey's frequent self-doubt that (my writing) *won't be good enough or that I'll be embarrassed by it.* Sandy related to the feeling of *wondering why you plow on.* And Gail found truth in Luke's experiences at Red Barn, stating, *I know that kind of energy that produces poem after poem.*

While the portrayal of the writing life felt familiar to most, there seemed to be a hesitation or a need to qualify the answer to this question on the part of some readers, mostly because of the age and writing experience of King's characters.

I have not been a writer for most of my life and I am way older than the characters in this book (Renay).

I haven't been in the writing life very long (Colleen).

Unfortunately, I joined the rank of writers very late in life so I can't identify with the struggles of young writers with no financial backing (Sandy).

I, too, came to writing late in life, and feel that my come-lately entrance coupled with my lack of "publication" reinforced the sentiments of some of King's characters. Jo also felt King portrayed the writing life accurately *right from the beginning with Adam's put down, "I find it incredible that you think you have anything to say." A cruder version of "Are you published?" As if that makes you a certified writer.* Indeed, emerging writers, like many of us, feel a lack of validation to say we are writers!

I loved that so many people identified King's writing personality archetypes in their own lives. Aside from Casey, Muriel seemed to be the most popular.

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I LOVE Muriel, said Renay. *Every writer needs a Muriel*, Collen echoed. And lucky Jo tells us, *I have a Muriel who takes time no matter what to support and encourage me*. Maribeth confesses, *Muriel is who I want to be!* And isn't she? To all of us?

As much as everyone loved Muriel, several readers felt resigned about Oscar and his antics. That resignation seemed to stem from Oscar's gender rather than his success as a writer. *We all know Oscars*, says Colleen, and Renay says, *I've known lots of men like this, writers or not, who think he deserves more than his female counterpart*.

When I was contemplating how to structure the question for this "book club experiment," I had pondered drilling down to what constitutes "success" and how that may change a writer (after it was achieved). I wondered whether or not Casey's "success" (agent sells her book) would make her more like Oscar. But given the readers' comments, now I wonder if her gender would prohibit such behavior.

If we take gender out of the equation, we still can't ignore the fact that publishing does change a writer's life. Along with the book on the shelf, money, critical acclaim, and maybe a spot teaching at a conference, there is also the self-promotion of book tours, social media platforms that often boil down to crowd size and book sales. Oscar laments, *I get six chairs and a music stand they nicked from high school band practice* (pg. 231).

In King's portrayals of writers, I wondered if she was rendering judgment. Maribeth said, *There are all the clichés of the writer: the Luke character—self-involved, selfish; and Oscar, who reminds me of some of my own workshop teachers, not teaching so much as issuing judgment from on high and in elusive ways. These portrayals, as much as I enjoyed them, felt a bit expected, the kind of portrayals you see in New Yorker cartoons, which invariably are poking fun at narcissistic and/or insecure writers*.

Colleen's curiosity about judgement went to the value in certain institutions that legitimize writing and that many writers seek out to gain traction. *Was her focus on the wasted retreat a commentary on the misuse of retreat time? I have never been on a writers' retreat and have read mixed reviews as to whether it's a good idea. I couldn't help but think King was saying skip the retreat, stay home and write instead*.

I was encouraged, like many of the responders were, by the ending of the book, when Casey is speaking to students about writing, and then attends a workshop given by another writer. Being on the verge of success, she still finds comfort and inspiration in workshop. She listens to the workshop leader give his instructions for a prompt on "description" (the couch, the bourbon bottle, the slot between the wall and the fridge ... you see? I've already told you my whole childhood in three details). Casey starts to write, "I circle my mother's bathroom and start writing about it—the greasy face lotion, the dry shampoo spray, the heavy razor..." (pg. 310-311). This scene, more than the call from the agent moments later, exemplifies the grit, courage and determination of so many of my fellow writer friends. Class after class, workshop after workshop, rejection after rejection, we are back on the floor, or around the table at the church, or in our studies by ourselves, circling a room in our mind and trying our best to describe the story within it.

The Responses

Renay Regardie

This is the hardest question for me because I have not been a “writer” for most of my life and I am way older than the characters in this book. If I thought about a writing life of famous writers, I’d think about a lot of drinking, partying, depressiveness, i.e., Hemingway. These people barely imbibe!!!!

So, I’ll answer this a bit differently.

Muriel—The true best friend, the person who really cares about others, who has issues of her own but wants to see other WOMEN succeed. I think there is a lot in this book about women’s dependence on men, and Casey stands on her own. How wonderful to have a wonderful woman friend who believes in her, spurs her on. I think Lily King is making a statement here about women not having to be dependent, to live through, a man. I LOVE Muriel.

Luke is a jerk. A narcissist. Writers and others have met this type before, I think.

Oscar—He’s the type who thinks despite success, he deserves more (Casey says at one point because he is a man, that’s what his expectations are). He’s also cowed by the woman author, his old friend (forgot her name) who speaks at larger audiences than he does. I’ve known lots of men like this, writers or not.

Silas—He does have issues. As does Casey. Are they two peas in a pod? Will they be able to sustain a relationship? I am not sure they will. Casey may be becoming a much stronger person.

The truest portrayal to me is that of Casey, a woman of talent, driven to follow her dream, yet full of insecurity and vulnerability. The steps she takes in this novel propel her into maturity. It’s been a long growth process for her. This may be true not just for a writer, but for any talented, driven young person trying to find their own way.

Colleen Scott

What’s accurate about the portrayal of the writing life is that Casey has all these writers in her life at all. I haven’t been in the writing life very long but since I have been, I feel drawn to spend time with other people who are doing what I am doing. I love attending events through the Writers Guild if only to be around other writers. We help each other be better at what we do.

I did wonder if King’s portrayal of some of the characters reflected her feelings about certain writing experiences. For example, was her focus on the wasted retreat a commentary on the misuse of retreat time? I have never been on a writers’ retreat and have read mixed reviews as to whether it’s a good idea. I couldn’t help but think King was saying skip the retreat, stay home and write instead.

I loved Muriel and I think she is the friend we all want to meet at a writing group; she is encouraging, experienced, and generous with her time. Every writer needs a Muriel.

Not sure everyone needs an Oscar, but he played a role as well. We all know Oscars. The lamenting he does outside a reading was a way for King to demonstrate a sense of entitlement that Casey has observed in every guy she's dated and how *they believed greatness was their destiny* (pg. 231). I can't help but think that maybe King herself encountered this sense of "entitlement." Casey goes on to say that she has *met women, driven women, but no woman has ever told me that greatness was her destiny* (pg.232). I think this is a commentary on the dynamics of men vs. women in the workplace but also an observation about successful writers who become self-absorbed and out of touch with the daily struggle of writing.

Linda Federman

Each of the writers is in some way an archetype, maybe even manifestations in individual characters that sprang from characteristics of one person. Each is like a bumper in a pinball game. Her interaction with each of them sends her shooting in a different direction. I think the fact that they are all writers creates a literary world, one in which she can instantly recognize herself, her weaknesses, and her ambitions. Some might argue that all these significant characters being writers is too "on the nose" but I like how it creates an environment for Casey to move through, and in which to see her own reflection.

"Some might argue that all these significant characters being writers is too "on the nose" but I like how it creates an environment for Casey to move through, and in which to see her own reflection."

—Linda Federman

Jo-Ann Baca

King's portrayal of the writing life rings very true for me. Casey experiences the all-too-familiar process of self-loathing, procrastination, and self-doubt that most authors face as some point. She wants feedback yet fears it; she thinks she doesn't put "enough" words on the page, doubts she has anything important to say, as Adam so coldly implies. She fears she doesn't measure up to those whom she perceives as having greater ability, believing it is easier for others. This resonated with me, unfortunately, when she seemed to measure her self-worth as a writer by the amount she had written and the time it took to do so. She doubts the quality of her writing because of the quantity. All too many writers are vulnerable in these ways.

Karen Schneiderman

The descriptions of Casey's writing life are totally believable. They made me feel better about the perfectionism I bring to my writing and the fear that it won't be good enough or that I will be embarrassed by it. I identified with the line, *You don't realize how much effort you've put into covering things up until you try to dig them out* (pg. 168).

Jo Balistreri

An Aside: The list of writers that King included ran the gamut as it does in real life. The recognition was enjoyable as if we were talking about them. I have a Muriel who takes time no matter what to support and encourage me. I doubt I could ever do without her. I have a

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“Luke” who takes and takes (finally I’m rid of him). There’s many under-the-radar writers who have issues and who I’ve learned to stay away from, their issues more a problem than their writing. And lastly my “Oscar” is a woman, on a completely different circuit, a good person, but not the kind I want to hang out with. Then the Caseys, all the good writers I know are a Casey. They are essential on a daily basis: understanding, vulnerable, good, honest critics, fun to be with. My writing team.

King’s understanding of the writing life accurately portrays that life for me. Right from the beginning with Adam’s put down, *I find it incredible that you think you have anything to say*

A cruder version of “Are you published?” As if that makes you a certified writer.

Casey’s writing doesn’t go well and talking about her novel makes her feel flayed alive. But she keeps at it, goes to a writer’s colony, Red Barn, works on the same chapter the whole time she’s there. She gets derailed with Luke, but goes back to her potting shed and keeps writing. It’s miserable and slow and she has doubts and feels she’s no good. *What do I have to show for my life?* She writes between jobs. She writes when she’s too tired to write. She is compelled to write.

She lives for writing, the intimacy of books. She writes because if *I didn’t write everything would be worse* (pg. 3). Reading Casey’s story, I felt it was mine. Writing is hard and I almost feel manic-depressive with the fear and anxiety and doubt, the sudden exhilaration when something you write is true and honest and good. Then the dip of “will it last?” Starting over again and again. Even when a piece is published it’s often bitter-sweet. What if no one likes it? But we know we will keep trying because that’s who we are.

Gail Comorat

What rang true was Luke’s churning out poems. I know that kind of energy that produces poem after poem, the way the brain can’t seem to shut down. And later, after Casey’s finished the novel and tries to write something new she says, *I knew those characters and how to write them. I heard their voices and knew their gestures* (pg.185). That line made me think about my characters I was writing about, made me want to get back into their lives.

Susan Morse

Is the first part of this question, one of those “trick” questions? King certainly presented the reader with several “writer types.” The “writing life” probably depends on the individual writer, the stage of their writing career, and the success, or lack thereof.

Casey is devoted to her art of fiction writing. When Casey and Silas were at the museum, Casey says, *It’s good to see art, to remember what a natural human impulse it has always been* (pg.150). Perhaps, King was reminding the reader of all of the different art forms with her protagonist’s poignant statement.

When Casey and Silas examine a Sargent painting, they examine it closely and comment on the subject’s left foot, and that she is about to take a step.

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Casey: *"If I could write something as good as right there, right where that belt cinches her pinafore." It's hard to pull my eyes from it. I don't know why it's so moving to me, and I could never explain. There's a madness to beauty when you stumble on it like that* (pg.151).

King presents such beauty in this book in her portrayal of a true grit writer.

Taralee Morgan

King did a great job of portraying the anxiety and procrastination that comes with writing. I also liked how she showed supportive artist communities. The scenes of attending small writer events and being motivated by meeting other writers were familiar to me.

I also was pleasantly surprised to find out that she attended my alma mater (Duke University) and majored in English Literature like I did. When I first graduated, I told people I wanted to be a novelist. I worked as an office worker in a small company making not too far above minimum wage. Unlike her, I decided early that I wanted to do more with my life than writing and went to graduate school in another profession (Speech-Language Pathology). Writing then became a hobby. I developed other hobbies but continued to write. What a coincidence it also was that we both ended up in education (I work in the public schools) in fields that center around language (mine is spoken language, hers is written language). I see Casey as who I would've been had I not decided to go to graduate school in a non-writing field. I even thought about becoming an English teacher at one point. I find her dedication to her writing ambition admirable.

Sandy Donnelly

Unfortunately, I've joined the rank of writers very late in my life so I can't identify with the struggles of a young writers with no financial backing. But the minute Adam asked her in the first chapter, *So how's the novel?* I immediately related to those condescending words and every chapter thereafter that relates to self-doubt, blank pages, and wondering why you plow on.

Sherri Wright

King describes moments in the writer's life so accurately. *Fear of exposure, weakness, lack of talent, looking like a fool for even thinking you could write in the first place* (pg. 316). The difficulty of getting into writing every day, the joy of finding a clear direction, knowing where it needs to go, of [finding] someone you respect [who] recognizes your work. I love the piece on pg.310 where she is speaking to the students and says her novel is the one thing that has been steady in her life when everything else seemed awful.

Maribeth Fischer

A great question. I think King nailed it on the writing life, good and bad. There are all the clichés of the writer: the Luke character—self-involved, selfish; and Oscar, who reminds me of some of my own workshop teachers, not teaching so much as issuing judgment from on high and in elusive ways. These portrayals, as much as I enjoyed them, felt a bit expected, the kind of portrayals you see in *New Yorker* cartoons, which invariably poke fun at narcissistic and/or insecure writers.

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On the other hand, Casey felt right at every level...her commitment to writing, her frustration, her fear, her self-doubt, the way, once an agent became interested, she simply froze...unable to work or write at all (I have watched this happen to a number of people in the Guild). But more than Casey, I loved Muriel. Loved her. And she felt like so many of the best writers I have known: kind, conscientious, encouraging but honest. Muriel is who I want to be! That moment when Casey comes home and there is a message from Muriel on her answering machine screaming, *I LOVE IT, I LOVE IT SO MUCH*—I still feel chills reading that. It was so much more beautiful and real than the deal with the agent at the end. And the scene pg. 166-167, where Muriel is going over Casey's manuscript with the check marks, the pages of notes, her suggestions about what to cut, and finally, her firm insistence that Casey has to write the scene she's avoiding writing...in those three pages I got such a picture of a working writer, but also such a picture of a wonderful friend. It might have been my favorite chapter in the book. I also love that Casey thanks her by baking her a small loaf of banana bread in her toaster oven. I think this is what the writing exchange so often is about...small gifts and gratitude and thoughtfulness. I realize how rare it is to see a portrayal of artists that emphasizes the deep care they show each other. I felt such gratitude to King for this.

(This question had two parts and so has two summaries)

Question 4 (part 1) posed by and responses compiled by Colleen Scott

Casey spends time in the library when she was supposed to be researching information about Cuba but instead, she ends up reading about writers and their dead mothers.

Question: Why do you think Casey does this? And just as importantly, why did Lily King include this chapter? Clearly King had looked all this up and granted, it was interesting, but how did it contribute to the book?

Many of the readers felt that this chapter was written to emphasize Casey's need to reconcile the loss of her own mother. Linda wrote, *it helps Casey see where she fits in the big picture, and helps her recognize that, despite the hole her mother's death leaves, others have found a way to still write, create, and move forward.* I felt this way too, that Casey was researching to confirm that it can be done, the writing and the grief. Jo said something similar: Casey reads about writers whose mothers have died to see *how they fared.* Susan echoed this with: *Casey identifies with those writers in their grief and finds confirmation that they ultimately succeeded.*

Renay wasn't surprised by Casey's research: *She is grieving her mother. The book she is writing is in a way based on her mother.* And Jo-Ann wrote: *Casey is beginning to realize that she has not acknowledged, much less dealt with, the impact her own mother's life and sudden death have on her life. By including this, King pays homage to the strong bond, good or bad, between mothers and their children.* Karen agreed that the section might have been added to address the mother-daughter relationship.

A number of readers felt the chapter was crucial. For Gail, this was the chapter that made Casey more human for her: *I felt the connection she had to her mother.* And for Sandy, this chapter made her (Casey) more real and vulnerable.

Maribeth wrote: *that she spends time not working on the novel and looking up writers whose mothers died, tells me how much Casey is grieving, how much she is trying to make sense of her own writing.* Maribeth also noted *the placement of the chapter seems important too, for just a few chapters later, Casey realizes that she has written the last sentence of her novel...In context of this chapter (about the writers whose mothers died) it feels as if she has stepped into place with all of those writers...she is one of them.*

Finally, Jen commented: *I loved the chapter and could have read more about writers and their mothers (not lovers). Hmmm. Writers and Mothers is perhaps another title the book could have had?*

The Responses

Colleen Scott

I think Casey spends time researching writers with dead mothers because she is a writer struggling to finish a book and she has just lost her own mother. I think she looks up famous authors in the same predicament because they made it through. She wants a truth out there in the history books to tell her it can be done, it has been done, and it will be okay. Sometimes when we are flailing, it's encouraging to see someone else who was where we are but they have gotten beyond it.

Linda Federman

She reads about dead mothers because she is struggling to reconcile her mother's death in her own life. I think it helps her see where she fits in the big picture, and helps her recognize that, despite the hole her mother's death leaves, others have found a way to still write, create, and move forward, absorbing the loss and grief. It helped her realize her mother's death did not rob her of a future.

Renay Regardie

I am not surprised Casey did this. She is grieving her mother. The book she is writing is in a way based on her mother. Casey is struggling with her grief and her writing. For some of the writers their mother's death stimulated their writing, set them free. For others, it caused psychiatric problems, changes in behavior. All of these relate to Casey's current feelings.

I think Lily King thought it was important to place Casey in a context of other writers, to analyze her behavior and feelings. Much better than if King had just said Casey brooded, found it hard to concentrate on her Cuba research.

For some of the writers their mother's death stimulated their writing, set them free. For others, it caused psychiatric problems, changes in behavior. All of these relate to Casey's current feelings.
—Renay Regardie

Jo-Ann Baca

Casey spends much time in the library researching writers and their dead mothers because she is beginning to realize that she has not acknowledged, much less dealt with, the impact her own mother's life and sudden death have on her life. By including this, King pays homage to the strong bond, good or bad, between mothers and their children. The parental influence is undeniable whether we admit it and reconcile with it or not. King shows us this to let us in on the fact that Casey has complex feelings about her parents that she needs to understand and accept in order to more fully grow into the person she is meant to be.

Karen Schneiderman

I'm not sure why this section on writers and their mothers is in the book—perhaps for Casey to reflect more on the complicated relationship she had with her mom. I loved that Edith Wharton stayed home from the funeral to concentrate on her writing. But speaking about mothers, the line, *when your mother tells you something about yourself, even if you've coaxed it out of her, it's hard not to always believe it* (pg. 92), really hit home with me.

Gail Comorat

This was the chapter that made Casey human for me. I felt the connection she had to her mother, the hole she felt after her mother's death. She'd just been dumped again (Silas sends her the postcard from Crested Butte) and she couldn't focus on any real research for her novel because she couldn't stop thinking about her mother. It made sense to me that she got sidetracked, reading about other writers' mother relationships. Researching Cuba was too close to her mother's story and too painful for her.

Jo Balistreri

Casey does this for the same reason we all do it. A mother has cancer. We read every novel out there where someone has cancer. It's an emotional survival technique. It feels comforting to be involved in someone else's life even knowing why we're doing it. It helps us get through it.

Casey reads about every writer whose mother died. She has a need to know how they fared. I think the book would have been fine without that chapter, but I found it interesting because I had done the same thing. When my mother was dying of cancer, I bought every book available on people who had died from cancer, how they managed it, etc. I went through each life as if it were mine and my mother's and when the person died, I grieved.

Susan Morse

Casey spent the time reading about writers and their dead mothers because she sought clarification for herself; she was on the edge and was missing her mother more, not less. She identifies with those writers in their grief and finds confirmation that they ultimately succeeded.

Perhaps, King is providing a signal to the reader that success is ahead for her protagonist.

Sandy Donnelly

Casey wants to know how other writers coped with grief. Adding it to Casey's character made her more real and vulnerable. No one knows how to cope with loss the first time around.

Jen Epler

Casey is looking for support in how to deal with her mother's death when she gets sidetracked with her research at the library. King putting this into the book (the research) allows us to see what Casey is reading, and how it might allow her to use it in processing her mother's death. The chapter helped Casey as much as it perhaps helped readers understand Casey's process for both writing past her mother's death and understanding how to grieve. It is a lesson on grieving. Personally, I loved the chapter and could have read more about writers and their mothers (not lovers). Hmmm. *Writers and Mothers* is perhaps another title the book could have had?

Sherri Wright

With her mother's death so recent and raw, along with her own struggle to write, she is drawn to Elliot, Lawrence, Wharton, Proust, Wolfe who lost their mothers in the middle of their writing careers. And she is encouraged by many of them reaching success after their mothers died. She does note, however, that Wolfe had her first nervous breakdown after losing her mother. It must resonate with the bees in Casey's head and the bells that won't stop clanging through her body. Her thoughts of suicide.

Maribeth Fischer

I love that this question was asked, for though I enjoyed this chapter (even copied it and sent it to a friend who is writing a book about her mother who recently died), I never

considered that it was odd to have this chapter in here. Yet there is no other chapter like it and, in truth, it is just a list that could easily have been excised from the book. So why is it here?

First, I think it very deliberately connects Casey's book (tangentially about her mom, set as it is in Cuba, where her mom grew up) and Casey's writing in general (she began writing fiction the year her mother left) to grief. *I don't write because I think I have something to say*, she says on pg. 3. *I write because if I don't, everything is worse*. Writing is essential to Casey. It's not a luxury...that she spends time not working on the novel and looking up writers whose mothers died, tells me how much Casey is grieving, how much she is trying to make sense of her own writing. And somehow, it felt like something she would do.

The placement of the chapter seems important too, for just a few chapters later, Casey realizes that she has written the last sentence of her novel. She did this amazing thing: she completed her draft, her "underpainting." It's a small moment, and yet, in context of this chapter (about the writers whose mothers died) it feels as if she has stepped into place with all of those writers...she is one of them.

Question 4 (part 2) posed by and responses compiled by Collen Scott Do you think *Writers & Lovers* will resonate well with people who are not writers? Why or why not?

Many of our readers felt this story would resonate with non-writers for three key reasons. First, the characters are, as Linda says, *very richly drawn*. Second the content itself was about so much more than writing. *Struggling with the parent-child relationship, longing to be self-actualized, loving more than one person at a time, are all universal ideas that can pull readers in, regardless of their experience in writing*, Jo-Ann wrote. Tara Lee agreed: *This story has a lot of elements that are relatable to people who don't have the ambition to be writers. Many people grew up in families that were less than ideal and have issues with their parents into adulthood. Many children choose a life that contradicts the lives their parents wanted for them. Adult friendships and romantic relationships are challenging at times...*

Third, all of us seemed to enjoy the writing itself:

The writing is so incisive (Karen).

It's beautifully written (Gail).

Skillfully written (Susan).

Sandy had an interesting thought in that while she thought the themes *all add up to a universal grief that anyone can relate to regardless of the subject...I do think the book addresses women more than men*. And Renay wondered if perhaps it would appeal to younger readers, *for it is a coming of age story*, she wrote, *and since I'm in my 70's, I'm not sure that certain of my friends would gravitate to the subject matter*.

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Of course, there were those who felt it would appeal more to writers than non-writers. Although Jen has recommended this book to many people, she felt there might be more in it for writers: *I think the book acts as a validation for writers, sort of an inside conversation amongst ourselves that non-writers may not be able to be a part of.* Maribeth was on the same page. While she hoped it would appeal to all readers, she has only recommended this writers.

Jo too was not as confident that it would be as interesting to non-writers. Jo wrote that she *tried it out on several non-writers, but there was too much on writing for them,* something Linda echoed. *There may have been a few too many references to other writers and works; even I, as a writer, found myself skipping over a few of those passages.*

The Responses

Colleen Scott

I am not sure if non-writers will like this book as much. I don't know any non-writers who have read it. I do think people like to read about successes after great struggle so for that I think yes, but I would be curious to hear from non-writers.

Linda Federman

I think the book can appeal to people who are not writers, because the characters are very richly drawn, and because of the way they reinforce and reflect Casey and her journey. There may have been a few too many references to other writers and works; even I, as a writer, found myself skipping over a few of those passages.

Renay Regardie

Will the book resonate with non-writers? I'm glad you asked that, because, while I really liked the book, I've found myself vacillating in recommending it to some of my friends. It is a coming-of-age story, and since I'm in my 70's I'm not sure that certain of my friends would gravitate to the subject matter, though most all would appreciate the writing. Kind of been there, done that. They might feel the same if Casey was in another field. One of my daughters-in-law will love this book and I'm sending her my copy. She is in a creative field.

Jo-Ann Baca

I think the book will resonate with people who are not writers because this is a coming-of-age story. It has both the depth of emotions and the colorful characters to keep us wanting to read more. The characters, while somewhat limited in development, are interesting enough for King to earn the readers' appreciation and trust. Struggling with the parent-child relationship, longing to be self-actualized, loving more than one person at a time, are all universal ideas that can pull readers in, regardless of their experience in writing.

Karen Schneiderman

I absolutely think non-writers will enjoy the book. The writing is so incisive. When the post office clerk says, *Hope your next six years are a little more exciting, sweetie pie,* I could just hear that "sweetie pie" although maybe it would be "honey."

I also loved all the restaurant details at Iris. I don't know why, except that they felt very real—I enjoyed the insider info. Made we want to be a more considerate patron!

Gail Comorat

I don't think you have to be a writer to like this book. It's beautifully written, the characters are very solid, and the story keeps getting better as you get into it. I kept turning the pages, wondering what would happen next. I liked even the minor characters a lot and felt invested in their stories. The novel included restaurant workers, athletes, teachers, bereaved family, and musicians; it wasn't just specifically about writers. For me, story and characters are just as important as the writing, so Casey could have been the professional golfer that she almost was, and I think I would have still enjoyed the story because the characters were so well-developed. Her relationships with them and her continued flaws made the book one I really wound up enjoying after my initial doubts.

Jo Balistreri

I don't think many non-writers would feel as strongly about the book as writers. I tried it out on several non-writers, but there was too much on writing for them. It doesn't hook them the way it does a writer.

Susan Morse

King's skillfully written novel portrays a complex protagonist, with whom you can sympathize, admire, and celebrate when she succeeds. King pulls in the reader, who will soar through the pages in this rich tale that takes you out of the present turmoil in our lives and leaves you with a feeling of hopefulness and the infinite goodness of human beings.

Taralee Morgan

This story has a lot of elements that are relatable to people who don't have the ambition to be writers. Many people grew up in families that were less than ideal and have issues with their parents into adulthood. Many children choose a life that contradicts the lives their parents wanted for them. Adult friendships and romantic relationships are challenging at times. With the rise of more single dads comes issues most single women with no children face when dating them. The hopelessness that comes with the combination of high student debt and limited lucrative job opportunities for non-STEM college graduates is familiar to many people. A lot of people have the ambition to achieve goals that require a lot of commitment but tend to not come with high financial rewards, such as performing music, running marathons, acting, dancing, and starting a non-profit. The balance between the practicalities of living and the time and money it takes to fulfill those dreams is a challenge in many people's lives. Most importantly, however, at the base of this story are a lot of interesting characters and a well-written narrative. That alone should satisfy plenty of readers.

Sandy Donnelly

Failure, rejection, disappointment, betrayal by family, friends n' lovers—all add up to a universal grief that anyone can relate to regardless of the subject. But I do think the book addresses women more than men.

Jen Epler

I've recommended the book, but almost singularly to writers. I think it is because she describes so well the fear, insecurity and vulnerability of being a writer, and although I've tried to convey this incredible sense of emotion to non-writers, I've always assumed they would never "get it," or want to understand, or perhaps they'd think I was a "negative whiner" (reference question #1). Even though I think non-writers can understand and enjoy this book, I think the book acts as a validation for writers, sort of an inside conversation amongst ourselves that non-writers may not be able to be a part of.

Maribeth Fischer

I can name twenty people right now who have read *Writers & Lovers* and loved it, but every one of them is a writer. Will non-writers enjoy it? I hope so, because the book is also about grief (not just over the mom's death, but the loss of family...the dad who disappointed her, the brother who has his own struggles and is too far to help much): it's about searching for love and about struggling to have the life you want, especially if that life is impractical. This is how it is for most people who want a career in the arts...any arts: they work long hours in service jobs, they hoard their time to write (or paint or dance), they still have student debt, they need health insurance...that is all so real.

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—Sandy Donnelly