

Discussion Questions for *The Friend*

1. Nunez opens the novel with short, seemingly disparate, paragraphs that relate anecdotes and deliver quotes from other people. She continues this pattern throughout most of the novel, braiding in the plot along the way. How does this work (does it work) to tell the story about grief and our connection to others?—**Gail Comorat**
2. Who is the friend? For most of the book, the “you” is the narrator’s friend/mentor, but in the final pages the “you” becomes the dog. How does Nunez make this switch so seamlessly that the reader is neither confused nor surprised? It seemed to happen organically—**Gail Comorat**. Or is “the friend” the woman writing the book? (*what kind of friend—oh shame on you*, the man says to “his friend” **pg. 197.**)—**Maribeth Fischer**
3. *Why do even graduate students not know the difference between a novel and a memoir?* the man (the “you”) complains at one point. For most of this book, I felt like one of those graduate students. I thought my question would be, “Why is this a novel?” (for it read like nonfiction to me). But then Nunez addresses this very issue when one of the students in her workshop accuses another student of writing something that feels “too real” to be a novel. The narrator says, “*You’re saying the character is too real?*” (**pg. 101**) Yikes, she’s saying that to me! I thought. Later, the narrator is at a literary panel when someone asks, a writer why his book, whose form is highly unconventional, is called a novel and he responds, “*It’s a novel because I say it is.*” (**pg. 111**). Is this enough? Finally, in **Chapter 11**, I understood why this is a novel (I think). But let’s talk about this. Does genre matter? Were you bothered by this feeling that this wasn’t a novel? What can we learn as writers from this boundary-blurring?—**Maribeth Fischer**
4. *There are things we do all the time in real life that we don’t put in our stories*, the narrator tells us on **pg. 103**. Most of *The Friend* seems to be filled with such things (reviews of movies the narrator has seen, plot summaries of books, and random encounters with strangers (**pg. 107** she sees a couple on a train and later sees them again...)). Is *The Friend* in some ways a novel that is trying to do all the things writers are told not to do? (*What’s the point in writing stories about the kind of people you meet every day in real life?* a student asks on **pg. 105**). Is that the real plot? The real reveal? We’ve been reading a book and thinking it’s one thing (grief over a friend’s suicide, falling in love with a dog) and realizing at the end that so much of what we thought was “true” was indeed fiction. Or was it? What is this book about (even my question isn’t sure what to ask!)—**Maribeth Fischer**

A few more ideas to consider...

5. I would have piggybacked on Maribeth’s question/comment about the unconventionality of this novel. Nunez does do many things that, as writers, we’re told not to do. The

narrator tells us everything she thinks and everything every other character in the novel thinks, including the dog. The technique is so unique to the novel and yet so successful in many ways that I couldn't decide if it was writing genius or writing fraud. Can't wait to hear what the group thinks.—**Judy Wood**

6. Nunez seems to be using a journal/memoir style, often taking advantage of vignettes rather than using a (driving) narrative style that pushes to some conclusion. Have we fallen into believing that "novel" means a style driven by the formulas we are so often given: problem, solution, failure, new problem, or complexity of problem until we find a final solution? Which style—problem-driven, or thought-driven—more closely reflects most of our lives most of the time today? Does it matter?—Sharon Hoover