

Discussion Questions

Songs in Ursa Major by Emma Brodie

1. Explore the family dynamic in the Quinn household. How does the tragedy of her mother's story affect Jane's relationships with Elsie, Grace, and Maggie? Why do you think the Quinn women choose not to marry?
2. Discuss the social fabric of Bayleen Island. How is the world of the locals different from that of the vacationers? In what ways is Jane able to move back and forth between these two spheres?
3. What does Willy see in Jane? How does her talent, in his view, compare to Jesse's? What does his willingness to bet on her suggest about his understanding of the music industry? Is he successful in this gamble? Why or why not?
4. Examine the power dynamics at Pegasus, paying close attention to Jane's first encounter with Vincent Ray in New York. Why is Vincent Ray so dismissive of the Breakers, and how does Jane react? How is his opinion reflective of attitudes within the industry as a whole?
5. Explore Jane's experience on tour with Jesse, his band, and the Breakers. What does the tour teach her about navigating life as a celebrity? How does the spotlight both deepen and test her relationship with Jesse?
6. Discuss Jane's creative process. How does it change after the tour? What mental blocks must she overcome in order to move to the next stage of her career?
7. Explore the theme of success in the novel. What risks does one take in the pursuit of fame? To what extent is success a corrupting influence? What are the "shortcuts" to success, and do these shortcuts render success any less legitimate? Why or why not? Consider, as you answer this question, Jane's assertion that she does not "want to depend on reflected glory" (217)
8. Compare and contrast Jane's, Morgan's, and Loretta's attitudes toward self-promotion. How do their different approaches affect their respective careers? How do the avenues of self-promotion available to these women reflect the music industry's gendered expectations?
9. Explore the boundary between the personal and professional realms of Jane's life. How do her personal relationships interfere with—or advance—her career? Conversely, how do her professional choices affect her relationships? Consider, as you answer this question, her unwillingness to record her first album as a solo artist, the professional opportunities that emerge as a result of her relationship with Jesse, and her decision to remove Rich's tracks from *Ursa Major*

10. On page 189, Rich explains his feelings about Ursa Major by saying, “I don’t hate the record. . . . Sometimes it just makes me . . . ashamed . . . of myself. Of the things I’ve never been able to say.” Why do you think Rich responds this way to Jane’s lyrics? What insight does this reaction provide into his inner life?
11. Discuss Jane’s rejection of Jesse’s proposal. Do you think she’s more afraid of his addiction or of always being in his shadow? To what extent is she able to make peace with this decision? Do you think she made the right choice? Why or why not?
12. Why is Jane unable to tell Jesse the truth about her mother? What does her omission reveal about her ongoing struggle to make sense of this part of her history? Why might Brodie have chosen to withhold this information from the reader as well?
13. Examine Jane’s decision to go to Greece. What does she hope to find there, and how do her expectations compare to her actual experience? How does her time away allow her to process her career decisions, her relationship with Jesse, and her grief about her mother?
14. Explore the conclusion of the novel. What does it suggest about each character’s personal growth? About the nature of fame? Is this the ending you expected? Why or why not?

(Questions courtesy of Penguin Random House)

