

Discussion Questions

Dept. of Speculation by Jenny Offill

1. This novel is written in a fragmentary, elliptical style. Why do you think it is structured this way?
2. How would the story change if it were told in a more straightforward fashion?
3. The epigraph for the novel is a quote from Socrates: "Speculators on the universe are... no better than madmen." Where else in the book does the narrator talk about madness?
4. Is this a book about loneliness?
5. Have you ever known an art monster? Have you ever been one?
6. On pages 43 and 44, the narrator includes a "Personality Questionnaire." What phobias or fears would you include if you wrote your own?
7. The narrator says, "I would give it up for her . . . but only if she would consent to lie quietly with me until she was eighteen." What do you make of this passage?
8. What does it mean to throw off ambition "like an expensive coat that no longer fits?"
9. When the narrator's sister tells her, "You have a kid-glove marriage" (page 81), does the narrator agree?
10. Why does the POV change midway through the book? Why does she become "the wife" and he, "the husband"?
11. What reaction did you have to the soscaresoscaresoscaresoscaresoscares chapter?
12. If someone asked you, "When were you the happiest?" what would you say? Would you say the same thing no matter who asked you?
13. The narrator says at one point, "The truth about getting older is that there are fewer and fewer things to make fun of until finally there is nothing you are sure you will never be." Does this seem true to you?

14. Why does the narrator want to meet the girl? Why is this section framed as if it is a student paper she is grading?

15. The wife says “(So ask the birds at least. Ask the fucking birds.)” Who is she speaking to? Why is this placed in parentheses as if it is an offhand comment?

16. Chapter 46—the last chapter in the novel—switches the point of view of first-person plural, “We.” Why do you think this change is made?

17. Is this a happy ending? Do you want it to be?

18. Discuss what matters most to you.

(Questions issued by publisher.)

