

The Reading Guide

Reading Group Questions

1. 'There they go, two clever women of sixty, making their way through the wet towards the car.' What do you think of this opening sentence? How does it help set the tone of the novel?
2. Reading in Bed is characterised by a very distinctive narrative voice. How would you describe it? Did you enjoy it?
3. Is Reading in Bed a sad novel, a funny novel, or a romantic novel, in your view?
4. Reading in Bed is not only about 'two clever women of sixty' - it's very much a book about the younger generation, too. How successfully do you think Sue Gee captures her younger characters, and how sympathetic did you feel towards them?
5. Sue Gee pays a great deal of attention to dialogue in Reading in Bed. What did you notice about the way she writes speech? Did this add to your enjoyment of the novel?
6. What does Maud's story contribute to the book?
7. For the majority of the novel, we view the character of Jeffrey from the outside, then suddenly, in a moment of crisis, Sue Gee allows us direct access to his thoughts and feelings. How did you feel about this sudden shift? Did it change your feelings about him?
8. Reading is something Dido and Georgia care about deeply, but it's a rather difficult activity to write about. How does Sue Gee tackle this problem, and what does her discussion of reading add to the novel? Did the novel remind you of any personal favourites, or provide you with any inspiration for future reading?

Other suggested reading

I Capture the Castle – Dodie Smith
Love in a Cold Climate and The Pursuit of Love – Nancy Mitford
Mariana – Monica Dickens
Mrs Miniver – Jan Struther
The Making of a Marchioness – Frances Hodgson Burnett
Dusty Answer – Rosamund Lehmann

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Reviews

‘As seductively readable as its title suggests, it draws the reader in with its skilful portrayal of real-life situations’ **The Times**

‘This is a novel in which books are at the heart, as well as friendships and how books and friends work together, books as the stuff of careers, books as the last stop before sleep, books in their millions, like at Hay-on-Wye, where the book opens, to a single sheet of paper blowing in the wind. I have a great love and admiration for Gee’s writing, her use of language, her creation of unforgettable characters’

Sue Baker, *Publishing News*, Pick of the Month

‘Sue Gee’s many fans will fall on Reading in Bed... Into the small, everyday scenarios that face all of us the author infiltrates a meditation on the big questions about death and its aftermath, trust, bereavement, love and the corrosive effects of disappointment. Giving great vividness to their inner lives, Gee unerringly and confidently evokes her characters’ **Elizabeth Buchan, *The Sunday Times***

‘A beautifully observed tale, written with boundless compassion and humour’

Fanny Blake, *Woman and Home*

‘A heartwarming read’ - **Eve**

‘Sue Gee is a magical writer. In Dido and Georgia she has created two strong women, desperate to survive what life and family throw at them. Death, bereavement, trust and forgiveness are the issues which she tackles truthfully and with humour. But it’s love, in all its forms, which is at the centre of this heart-warming tale’ **Daily Express**

‘Sue Gee writes subtly and deftly, observing with a wry and sympathetic eye, and the result is far from depressing despite the nature of the material. This is a hugely enjoyable and rewarding read’ **Carol Birch, *Independent***

‘A riveting and affecting story of two women, over 50, whose happy families suddenly go haywire. It just shows – you never know what’s coming’ **Michele Hanson, *Guardian***

About the Book

Friends since university, with busy working lives now behind them, Dido and Georgia have long been looking forward to books and outings, conversation and carefree days. Alas: life is rarely as one wishes it to be, and both find themselves caught up in wholly unexpected domestic drama. Dido, for the first time, has cause to question her

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marriage; widowed Georgia is certain her husband will return to her. Meanwhile, an eccentric country cousin goes wildly off the rails, children are unhappy in love, and perfect health is all at once in question.

Turning to one another should be as natural as breathing, but with so much at stake even this old friendship comes under strain. As hatches are battened down, and silence falls, it takes all their loyalty and humour to recover the easy, confiding intimacy of the past.

Wry, surprising, moving and uplifting, Reading in Bed will delight anyone who has known the pleasure of turning to a well-loved book, or a true friend.

Interview with the author

Was your childhood ambition always to be a writer?

I was a passionate reader as a child, and though for a long time I had no ambition to write, I now know that my childhood made me a writer. It was the 1950s, we lived in the country, and I had an extraordinary freedom. I walked and walked the lanes, and as I grew older, and we moved, I constantly told myself stories, trying to recapture my country life. Walking home from school, I'd reach my own road and turn back again, not wanting to break off the story, which somehow I could only tell on the hoof, or in bed. It wasn't until I wrote *The Hours of the Night* (1996) that I realised that all my writing was really a search for the lost landscape of my childhood, and that though I was writing about the Welsh borders I was also rediscovering those Leicestershire country lanes, with swallows swooping ahead of me, and the sound of hens. Even now, to write the word 'lane' reconnects me with those days.

How long have you been writing?

Since I was thirty: a late starter. I fell in love, and began a short story, which won the London Writers competition. But I didn't really settle down to write until I was thirty-six, at home with my baby son, and carving out time for my first novel: *Spring Will Be Ours* (1985 – I think) which began with the wartime history of my Polish in-laws.

What do you most enjoy about writing?

Travelling to and losing myself in another place – which might include the past, as in *The Mysteries of Glass* (2004): set in a quiet country parish in 1860. And refining every sentence: it gives me joy at that level, too.

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Which writers do you admire? Which authors have influenced your writing the most and why?

I am treating these questions as one, since to admire is also to absorb some influence, I think. Katherine Mansfield has been the greatest influence, though it took me a long time to realise that. Kezia, the child in her long New Zealand stories, stands, I think, behind some of the children I've created: Meredith in *Earth & Heaven* (2000) and Alice in *The Mysteries of Glass*. Virginia Woolf's novels and diaries stand alone as works of genius. Contemporary writers I admire include Alice Thomas Ellis and Shena Mackay, whose early work is some of the boldest and most stylistically inventive of any English writer. And Justin Cartwright: a great range of ideas, a wonderful stylist, and a great humanitarian. I also admire Michèle Hanson's Guardian columns: the funniest and sharpest woman in Britain.

What are you reading at the moment?

Justin Cartwright: *The Song Before It Is Sung*.

To what extent has your life experience influenced your writing?

As I say, I think it all stems from my childhood: time to be alone, all the experiences of living in the country, before the technological revolution. A much simpler and more wholesome time. Later, life of course grew more complicated, and I think a number of my novels are driven by emotional crises.

Did you know how *Reading in Bed* would end before you started writing it?

No. With some of my novels I've worked the whole way through towards a particular last line, but here I did not know either the way things would be resolved, or what the last lines would be. I felt as if I had thrown a lot of balls up in the air with no idea of how I was going to bring them down again. In the end, everything felt as if it was falling into the right place, but the actual last lines I changed from the first draft, realising I needed something more indefinite, rippling away from event to idea. It's a very secular book, but I wanted something of the spirit in the way it ends.

What inspired your new novel, *Reading in Bed*?

Originally, it was all focussed on Chloe, the thirty-something dyslexic stylist, who in the first draft opened the whole novel. Those opening lines were with me for about four years before I sat down to write. Then I watched two old friends leaving a restaurant in the pouring rain one evening, and everything turned round: they gave me a new opening line, and a whole new dimension to the novel, which now became about age, as well

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as youth. My own experience of illness and bereavement is also to some extent worked into the novel, but love and romance are very important as the counterpoint to this. I was, however, very clear that I didn't want to write a novel in which a widowed woman turns her life round and meets a new man. There's enough of that about in fiction already, and I wanted to write something real and true: to life, and to my characters. What kind of audience do you think Reading in Bed is aimed at?

I never aim my novels at anyone: I write entirely for myself, though I'm aware at every turn of what might and might not work for a reader. However, I do hope that Reading in Bed will appeal to people of all ages, in all the great experiences of life: youth and age, working and retirement, bereavement and romance. It's a novel which moves very quickly from light to dark and back again, and I hope I've succeeded in giving strong themes a light touch. It gave me enormous pleasure to write, not least because I finally allowed myself to be funny.

About the author

Eva Rice is the author of two previous novels, *Standing Room Only* and *Butterfly Sting*, and one non-fiction title, *Who's Who in Enid Blyton*. She lives in London with her boyfriend Pete, their baby daughter Martha, Swift the dog and some canaries.