

Instances of the Number 3

by Salley Vickers

“The classic threesome—husband, wife, mistress—proves mathematically unstable in Vickers’s profound comic novel . . . In the tradition of the late Iris Murdoch, this extraordinary book will inspire and delight.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)



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Graham Hughes

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The questions and discussion topics that follow are intended to augment your group’s reading of Salley Vickers’s novel *Instances of the Number 3*, a window into the lives of the widow and mistress of the recently deceased Peter Hansome. We hope they will enhance your discussion by providing different angles from which to approach the various layers of this sophisticated ghost story.

INTRODUCTION

After Peter Hansome’s death, his wife, Bridget, is contacted by Frances Slater, who had been her husband’s mistress for the past seven years. Although aware and unusually accepting of her husband’s numerous infidelities, Bridget cannot help but be hurt by the longevity of his relationship with Frances. Yet in the weeks after his death, an unlikely friendship springs up between these two women, whose only apparent bond is having loved the same man. As their first Christmas without him approaches, a young Iranian boy, who also played a role in Peter’s life, arrives on Bridget’s doorstep. As Bridget slowly unwinds the mystery of Zahin’s connection to Peter, she is surprised by another unexpected guest—her husband’s ghost.

QUESTIONS FOR
DISCUSSION

Soon the levelheaded Bridget finds herself involved with a married man, and Frances is caught between two artists whom her gallery represents. As their lives without Peter become increasingly complicated, each woman is surprised to discover the lasting legacy of Peter's life with them.

Salley Vickers's literary love story is a fresh look at the inconsistencies, passions, and foibles of the human heart.

1. With whom does your initial sympathy lie, Bridget or Frances? Compare their reactions to Peter's death. Do your sympathies change through the course of the novel?
2. Describe Peter's character. How do Frances's and Bridget's impressions of him differ? Which woman has a better understanding of him?
3. Compare the personality traits of Bridget and Frances. In what ways are they similar? Do their characteristics complement each other? How does the idea of reactive components (p. 9) account for Peter's attraction to both women?
4. Discuss the secular and religious significance of the number 3. What instances are there of each throughout the story?
5. How can Peter's declaration of love for Bridget (p. 8), delivered moments before he consummates his relationship with Frances, be considered a sign of loyalty? Why is Frances moved by his assertion?
6. How does the voice of an omniscient narrator function in this novel? What makes this technique especially effective?
7. How would you describe Bridget and Peter's marriage? Would Peter have been happier married to Frances?
8. Why is Peter initially attracted to Zelda (pp. 157–60)? Does the nature of his desire change? He tells Zelda about Frances, but not about Bridget. Whom is Peter trying to protect by this omission?
9. Why does Bridget accept Peter's indiscretions? Does her response seem different from a typical American response? In what ways does the John Donne quote illuminate her thoughts on this topic (p. 236)? Why did she remain loyal to Peter? Why does her relationship with Stanley make her feel as if she were being unfaithful to her husband? Does your opinion of Bridget change after she begins a relationship with a married man?
10. All three of the main characters experienced tragedies during their childhoods. How did they react to these incidents? In what ways did their pasts draw them together?
11. Why does Peter begin to haunt Bridget and Frances? Although he watches over both his wife and his mistress, he communicates only with Bridget. Why does he reveal himself only to his widow?

12. Discuss Bridget's relationship with Sister Mary Eustasia. Why were these two women attracted to each other? What effect did the nun's death (p. 123) have on Bridget?
13. What does Zahin want when he arrives at Bridget's home (p. 25)? Does he know that Peter has been killed? Does Bridget's decision to let him into her home seem uncharacteristic? How do his motives change through the story? When does Bridget begin to realize the nature of Peter's relationship with her young boarder? Why doesn't she share this knowledge with Frances?
14. In what ways does the art gallery crowd—Roy, Frances, and Painter—constitute another “instance of the number 3”? How does the birth of Petra alter this relationship? How does she bring Frances and Painter together?
15. Discuss the literary references that run throughout the novel. How does the author use works like *Hamlet* and the poem “When You Are Old” to further illustrate elements of her story? How did Bridget's passion for literature affect her relationship with Peter? How did it affect her relationship with Stanley?
16. Who is the third woman who is always present in Peter's mind during his sexual encounters? Why does this image of his young lover haunt Peter so relentlessly? What does Veronica represent to Peter (p. 107)?
17. Does Bridget bear any responsibility for Peter's infidelities? Consider her reaction when she learns that he does not like to be left alone. Why is it easier for Bridget to feel fond of Peter when she is in France (p. 7)?
18. Peter died on his way to visit Zelda. At the moment of his death, did he come to understand the truths that Father Gerard spoke of? Has Peter been punished for letting his desire for Zelda creep into all other areas of his life? Is there something morally wrong with their relationship?
19. Discuss the concept of forgiveness in this novel. Why is it so important for Peter to have Bridget's forgiveness? When does Bridget truly forgive her husband?
20. Consider Peter's first meeting with Bridget, his holiday in Paris with Frances, and his long car ride with Zelda. With whom does he seem happiest? How do his feelings toward these people differ? What does he need from each of them?
21. Why does Peter begin seeing Father Gerard? What elements of the Catholic faith is he drawn to? Discuss the role that religion plays in the story. Is seeing Peter's ghost a spiritual experience?
22. Why does it take Frances so long to realize that she is pregnant with Peter's child? Is it fitting that his mistress, instead of his wife, should carry his child?
23. Are Frances, Bridget, and Zahin happier without Peter? How did they each come to terms with his death? In what ways has his absence liberated them? What futures do you imagine for the three lovers that Peter has left behind?

24. In what ways does Salley Vickers's story borrow from a traditional drawing room comedy? Can you think of any examples? How does the author modernize her version of this genre?

25. Love is very important to all the major characters in this book, but each one sees love differently. How do you think Bridget, Frances, and Peter would describe love? Do you agree with Bridget when she says, "I wonder if it really matters *who* you love . . . It's *that* you love that counts, isn't it?" (p. 227)?

PRAISE FOR
MISS GARNET'S ANGEL

"*Miss Garnet's Angel* is a little jewel of a novel: brilliant and beautiful and multifaceted, perfect in its way. Clear-eyed and unsentimental, it is nonetheless filled with genuine feeling, crammed with wit and wisdom, aesthetic visions and ethical judgments . . . *Miss Garnet's Angel* is a most impressive debut, and one eagerly looks forward to Vickers's next book."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"[Vickers's] juxtaposition of ancient and modern well serves her larger purpose, summoning up a palimpsest of cultures, faiths and civilizations that have infused and enriched one another. Artfully wrought, yet told with a bracing directness, the story of *Miss Garnet* is indeed a gem."

—*The Wall Street Journal*

"*Miss Garnet* is a respectable, middle-aged Englishwoman who is overwhelmed by her first visit to Venice. We think, well yes, we know this plot; but the book turns out to be subtle, unexpected, and haunting in a way we certainly never guessed."

—Penelope Fitzgerald, author of *The Blue Flower* and *Offshore*

"*Miss Garnet's Angel* is the sort of novel I really enjoy. It is decorous, very kind, very funny; and I knew as I read it that I would want to read it again—probably quite soon. The best of tests. Barbara Pym fans, please note!"

—John Bayley, literary critic and author of *The Red Hat* and *Elegy for Iris*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SALLEY VICKERS novels, *Instances of the Number 3* and *Miss Garnet's Angel*, have been acclaimed best-sellers in Britain. A former university lecturer in literature, she is a trained analytical psychologist and lectures widely on the connections between literature, psychology, and religion. She lives in London and Bath.

For more information on Salley Vickers or her novels, please visit www.SalleyVickers.com