



**Discussion Questions for *I Never Promised You A Rose Garden*  
by Joanne Greenberg**

1. How do Esther and Jacob respond to Deborah's illness? What does the novel's opening scene indicate about their different parenting approaches?
2. Discuss the nature of Deborah's imaginary world. What are the characteristics of Yr? What do the Collect and the Censor want? What rules does Deborah set for herself based on what they tell her?
3. In her afterword, the author writes, "Many psychiatrists with backgrounds in chemical therapies felt that schizophrenia-which had been my diagnosis-is incurable. ... Statistically, of course, more than one-third of us do recover." What was your initial reaction to Deborah's case file, appearing in chapter two? How optimistic were you about her prognosis?
4. What illusions do the novel's "healthy" characters create for themselves?
5. To what degree do Dr. Fried and Deborah's parents create their own imperfect realities?
6. Deborah experienced the pain of anti-Semitism throughout her childhood, and the shadow of Hitler is described in many of the novel's passages, including in chapter twelve. To what extent did this history contribute to her illness?
7. Why are Deborah and Carla drawn to each other? How are their views of the world alike and different? Do they trust each other?
8. In chapter six, "upuru" is defined as "Yr's word for the whole memory and emotion of that last hospital day," referring to the surgery Deborah experienced as a little girl. What could have been done to make the surgery less traumatic? How did it influence her perception of healers, and the promise of healing?
9. How does Deborah think of her body? In her mind, why is it necessary to hurt herself physically? What does suicide mean to her?
10. Discuss the culture of Deborah's mental hospital. How do the patients form alliances? How much power do they have? How much power do they think they have? Do its wards, hierarchies, rules, and rule breakers remind you of any other institutions (in politics, in corporate America, or elsewhere)?
11. What does Miss Coral's instruction signify to Deborah? What is their understanding of the purpose of language?
12. The author notes in the afterword that when her novel was first published in the 1960s, "madness" was sometimes seen as a liberating, creative force. How did her work challenge this belief? How might Deborah have fared in the twenty-first century?

13. In chapter twenty-eight, Deborah tries to imagine her employment qualifications. What does this passage say about her state of mind at this point in her life? How has her self-perception changed since the beginning of the novel?

### **Q&A With Joanne Greenberg**

Q. Of your many novels, *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* is closest to your own life story and is also your best-known work. How do you feel about that?

A. Every one of my books has a strong autobiographical component. The reality of my characters is set by my own perceptions. *Rose Garden* was my attempt to transform personal experience into an artistic form, but that girl was ten years younger than the twenty-six year old wife and mother I was when I wrote it.

Q. Was it difficult for you to write about this period in your life?

A. The book was very difficult to write. I was, at that time, quite isolated in a small house with two small sons, few neighbors, and no car. My neighbors did help, TV helped, my husband, Albert, helped, and the hard work I had to do aside from my writing also helped. I was very motivated to write that book, and motivation means that time will be found to do what is necessary.

Q. Is it difficult to revisit it now?

A. I've only revisited the book in parts, never straight through, which I plan to do for this new edition. Over the years, I've faced many challenges to its validity and to the validity of my experience from people who do not believe that people can recover from serious and protracted mental illness.

I've had to develop a hide like a rhino. Parts of the book still will give me pain because my therapist has become identified with my recovery when she should shine in her own right for her courage and humanity, as well as for the theory by which she worked with me and many others.

Every author I know cringes at certain parts in rereading a past work. I see all the seams, the bits cobbled together, the sentences that fall flat. Now and then, I'll come across something I've written that pleases me—there are eighteen novels and short story collections, after all, but what's painful in rereading a work is that the ill-chosen word or poorly constructed sentence is now beyond correction.

Q. Did you feel any constraint or responsibility when writing about characters that were inspired by people you had known and cared for?

A. I tried to be as fair as I could. There are no villains in the work, but the fictionalizing which I did as a protection for my own possible fragility possibly offended some people. The memoir I am

writing now about my years as a fire and rescue team member is a lot more problematic. No one is happy being trapped in a short description, even if it is complimentary.

Q. What do you hope readers take away from reading *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*?

A. I wrote the book to show what it felt like to be mentally ill and to be treated for it without being given any of the modern medications now deemed necessary. The process is long and intense, but it is certainly shorter and cheaper than the intermittent short hospitalizations people are now subject to, where there is no psychotherapy, but only drugs, most with severe side effects. There are now support groups-made up of people with psychiatric problems-which are very useful and can prevent hospitalization and the need for so much medication.

Q. When did you begin to write and/or see yourself as a writer, either privately or professionally?

A. Because there's no specific test to pass, anyone can say she's a writer, but until someone else validates it by publication, the writer doesn't believe it and no one else does, either. The person who validated me was Robert Gottlieb, who was at Simon and Schuster. My husband, Albert, said he thought I could publish my work and he encouraged me, but relatives don't count. Bob Gottlieb took me seriously enough to start me on my career. The book, my first, was *The King's Persons*, a historical novel about the York Massacre of 1190. It won a prize. I was a writer.

Q. Do you have any writing from the time you spent in treatment? If so, do you ever revisit it now and how does it feel to do so?

A. At my sickest, I wasn't writing anything, but I do have some poetry from around that time. I look at it as being pretty standard teenage writing, with only a glimpse here and there of a phrase or metaphor of some depth or grace. I had to put in lots of time to make it better. Everyone does, I think. As a poet, I am still only so-so.

Q. Who are some of your favorite writers?

A. I have a great many, but I will give you my big ten. They are not in order.

John Williams: *Stoner*, *Augustus*, *Butcher's Crossing*

Dorothy Bryant: *Madame Psyche*, *The Test*, and one she is working on now

Flannery O'Connor: anything

John Cheever: short stories

Andre Brink: *A Dry White Season*, and others

J.R. Salamanca: *That Summer's Trance*, and others

Margaret Lawrence: *A Jest of God*, *The Stone Angel*, and others

Kent Haruf: anything he writes

Thomas Williams: stories, and *A Night of Trees*

T.C. Boyle: *Tortilla Curtain*, *Talk Talk*, and others

Of course, Tolstoi, Flaubert-they're great for a reason

Q. What inspires you?

A. The courage of people inspires me. I have a heroes collection and I'm always refreshed by contemplating their actions. When I think about heroes, I don't mean what people call "activists." The activists I know tend not to listen very well. The heroes I mean are people who surmount the insurmountable by a combination of courage and wit, perseverance and humor.

Some have confronted the voices in their heads and made them yield meaning.

Some have found ways to succeed in countries where language and culture are foreign to them, with dignity. I know people who have gotten advanced degrees after having become deaf and blind. Some have come out of prison, facing that stigma and the crippling rules of parole and made the transition into strong and durable lives. Pain and suffering are not the same. Some people have learned to endure the pain they have without giving in to suffering. I am often supplied with words and pictures of people at their worst. The human being at her best is an inspiring thing.

Q. You've spoken widely about your experience battling schizophrenia. In addition to your own book, are there others you'd recommend to those who are coping with or interested in learning more about the experience of mental illness?

A. *Out of the Woods* by Stuart T. Hauser, Joseph P. Allen, and Eve Golden. We hear all about getting sick. What are the strengths we can use to fight mental illness?

*Agnes's Jacket* by Gail Hornstein. To paraphrase Kipling, "Our strength to comfort our distress." *Beyond Medication* by David Garfield. We are more than our bioneural routes and synapses.

Q. Do you have any advice for writers, young or old, who want to write about a significant period in their own lives?

A. I would say that they should write head on and not let the trip change as they write. If the writer begins to see herself as a representative of something greater than she is, or if he begins to imagine himself on Oprah instead of concentrating on putting the experience down as clearly and honestly as possible, the path will soon be overgrown with weeds. Start without bringing your internal critic into the work until it is finished.

Then the critic can be called in for rewrites. You don't need to know how to end the work, either. That will arise out of the work itself. Maybe a public will read it; maybe not. The prize is not publication, which anyone can do now, with a computer. The prize will be the fullest expression you can achieve.