How to Read a Novel

By John Sutherland

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about How to Read a Novel are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach How to Read a Novel.

About the Book

“Do we still know how to read a novel?” John Sutherland, Chairman of the 2005 Booker Prize Committee, asks. His disheartened answer is an unequivocal, “No.” But Sutherland has not given up hope. With acerbic wit and intellect, he traces the history of what it used to mean to be well-read and tells readers what it still means today. Using this delightful book as a means to an end, he reminds readers how the delicate charms of fiction can be at once wonderful and inspired and infuriating.

On one level this is a book about novels: how they work, what they’re about, what makes them good or bad, and how to talk about them. At a deeper level, this is a book in which one of the most intimate tête-à-têtes is described—one in which a reader meets a novel. Will a great love affair begin? Will the rendezvous end in disappointment? Who can say? In order for the relationship to take its appropriate course all the details must be clearly acknowledged and understood for their complexities: plot, point of view, character, style, pace, first and last sentences, and even beauty.

Still, Sutherland knows a true understanding of fiction is more than a flirtation with text and style—it is a business. Taking his readers on a trip to the bookshop, he helps them judge a book by its cover based on design and color, wondering aloud what genre might be best, even going so
far as to analyze one of the latest American bestsellers to further help the buying reader choose the novel that is right for him or her.

In a book that is as wry and humorous as it is learned and opinionated, John Sutherland tells you everything you always wanted to know about how to read fiction better than you do now (but, were afraid to ask).

About the Author


Discussion Questions

Helpful Questions for Any and Every Novel You Read

1) Famous first sentences: Read the first sentence, outside the world the author has created can it stand alone? Or is it only true within the context provided, and if so, how do you feel about statement in the fiction setting vs. a real world setting?

2) If reading an older work, what is the original publication date? How do you think being published during that period might have affected this particular title? Would it have been controversial, or was it period appropriate?

3) Discuss the author. How much of a role does the author’s own personal history seem to intercede in his or her novel? Are there childhood themes that seem drawn on real life? How do you think the author’s own experiences altered the way he or she developed this “world?”

4) Forewords, Epigraphs, and Afterwords: What did you learn from any extra content? Were there themes you hadn’t thought of and if so, how might these have been better introduced in the main body of the work?

5) Was anyone tempted to write in the margins or underline key phrases? If so, look through your books and discuss what you felt compelled to highlight during your reading. Why did these certain phrases or moments resonate with you as a reader?

6) Fiction is a place where the unspeakable can often be spoken, like a subject that might be taboo to discuss openly, like race or homosexuality. What do you feel this novel brought to light and how do you think it might dictate perception? Do you feel differently about the subject brought up or do you think the author failed to make an impact?
7) Fiction has the unique ability to tell history without any sense of boundary, giving a feel for time or place or atmosphere. Did you gain a sense of history from your reading or do you think the history was “off” due to use of poetic license? If you have lived through that time period, do you think it was appropriate?

8) If there was a film of the book, and you have viewed it, how are they alike and different? Which appealed to you more and why? Do you feel something was lost in translation during the transition from page to screen?

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