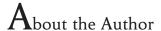
### THE SISTERS

by Nancy Jensen



• A Conversation with Nancy Jensen

# $\mathbf{B}_{\mathsf{ehind}}$ the Novel

• In Her Own Words

# $K_{\text{eep on Reading}}$

- Recommended Reading
- Reading Group Questions

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**K** ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN



A Reading Group Gold Selection

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#### Who are your favorite authors?

This is always a hard question for me to answer, as I tend to have favorite works rather than favorite authors. Rarely do I love a writer's entire body of work, though I may love a few particular pieces, but if pressed, I'd say James Joyce, Jane Austen, George Bernard Shaw, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot.

#### Who has had a major influence on your writing?

Teachers have had the most direct influence, most significantly Sena Jeter Naslund and Sydney Lea. I also feel strongly influenced by Scott Russell Sanders. Though I never studied with him directly, a couple of brief meetings with him—spread across twenty years, supported in between times by reading and admiring his work for his clarity of expression—make him count for me as a significant influence.

# What word or words do you always have trouble spelling?

It doesn't happen when I write by hand, but I find it very funny (and perhaps a wee bit Freudian) that I consistently type the word writing as writhing!

## Which of your characters would you want to be and why?

I'd like to be as gifted, as brave, as centered, as open, and as generous as my character Grace in *The Sisters*.

#### Which author would you invite to dinner?

First I'd have to resurrect him, but I'd love to invite George Bernard Shaw to dinner. Having done so, however, I suspect I'd regret the invitation because I'd know I'd never be able to keep up with his intellect, his wit, or his perfect turns of phrase.

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#### What is the quality you most like in yourself?

I like that animals nearly always immediately trust me.

### What are the qualities you most like in your friends?

Intelligence that they don't ever take too seriously.

## Would you be lying if you said your works were not autobiographical?

No, I wouldn't be lying any more than a bird would be lying if it said its nest was its unique creation and not a collection of identifiable bits from my yard—a knot of cat hair, a stem from a maple leaf, a bit of string from a package, a finger of dryer lint.

#### What is your favorite book?

Hmm...that's one of those "desert island" questions. I love many, many books, but I can't claim a favorite any more than I could say which of my pets is my favorite. If forced to grab either my favorite book or favorite pet in fleeing a burning house, I'd wind up burning to death because I couldn't choose.

#### What book would you read three times?

I've read lots of books three, five, eight, ten times or more, but many of them I've read because I teach and so I assign certain books in particular classes every few years. Just for myself, I'm sure I'll read *Middlemarch* a few more times before I die, as well as *An American Tragedy* and all of Jane Austen.

Excerpted from the "20 Questions Author Interview" © 2011 The Reading Room™



About the Author

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### Why I Wrote The Sisters

When I was about ten or eleven years old, my sister pushed me into our room and whispered that our grandmother, who had been upset all day, had received a letter telling her that her sister was dead. I knew about my grandmother's brothers, but this was the first time I'd ever heard mention of a sister. I tried to ask questions, but my sister shushed me, telling me I must never ask anyone, and especially not Grandma, about this. Later, my mother repeated the same admonition, but I couldn't stop thinking about this estranged sister.

Over the years, fragments of the family lore surrounding the sister trickled down to me—though my grandmother still kept silent. I heard the sister was a tramp and a gold digger. Sometimes it was implied that this was why she had been cast out of the family, but other times it was suggested she had turned her back on them. I could understand how someone might reject a family member. I could understand how a person might speak badly of the one who had been rejected. But I could not understand, and I could not stop wanting to know, what kind of offense or betrayal could result in one sister's deciding to erase another, as if she had never existed. My grandmother died without sharing the intricacies of her story, so I knew if I was ever going to have an answer to my question, I'd have to write it myself.

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### Researching the Novel

When I was just beginning to think about writing a novel but hadn't yet fixed on a particular story, my parents and I visited the Frazier Arms Museum, which had just opened in Louisville, Kentucky. I was wandering around looking at huge display cases of armor, lances, and swords, thinking of what a terrible irony it was that these tools of battle were so utterly beautiful—so masterfully crafted and intricately decorated. They were works of art. I turned the corner to discover a small room where a film was playing about the making of chain mail. It was fascinating, and, in that moment, though I had absolutely no idea who this character was—not even the gender— I knew I wanted to include in the novel (that didn't even exist yet as a story) a character who made chain mail.

I'd grown up hearing my grandmother talk about the 1937 Flood on the Ohio River, and when I began to think about including a flood in the story, I started hunting the Internet for anything that might give me personal views of the experience. I found a limited edition of a book published by a Louisville-area high school that included personal narratives, written by students, about the flood. And, because I was looking on eBay for old newspapers or clippings that covered the flood, I stumbled upon the Shirley Temple scrapbook that became the model for the child Alma's scrapbook.

Really, it's incredible the stuff you can find on eBay, even if you don't know what you're looking for. Very early on in the writing, a stereopticon appeared as something young Bertie and Mabel shared. I had once seen a stereopticon as a child, so at first I started looking on the Internet for images that would verify (or correct) the accuracy of my memory. Then



Behind the Novel

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I decided maybe I should try to buy a stereopticon (I never did), but in looking for one on eBay, I found collections of stereocards, including a pornographic set. Several of the cards were shown as part of the sales listing, and one of these became the basis of the set Mabel's stepfather, Jim Butcher, shows her just before he rapes her the first time. I don't now remember what exactly was in the image, as I adapted it significantly, but I do remember the colors. Mabel's story of abuse grew almost entirely out of this single stereocard on eBay.

I went back to eBay when I suddenly found Mabel, years later, holding a copy of *Life* in her hands, and I bought, sight unseen, a collection of a dozen or so Vietnam-era issues, just wanting to get a feel for what she might be reading and thinking about around that time. The photograph of the pair of wounded soldiers she looks at is actually the cover photo on one of the issues from February 1966.

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# The Magnificent Ambersons Booth Tarkington

In this novel, Tarkington illustrates the high price—to individuals, to families, to communities, and to an entire culture—of failing to recognize that opening some doors will forever nail others shut.

### An American Tragedy Theodore Dreiser

Dreiser's greatest novel is far too rich and multilayered to be reduced to a crisp summary.

Just read it.

### The Art of Fielding Chad Harbach

Take a group of characters who have all had to struggle simply to feel worthy of their dreams, show how the dreams come within reach through application of talent and a patient dedication to learning, then threaten the realization of those dreams with a combination of choice and chance, add melodious prose, and you have Harbach's The Art of Fielding, my favorite new novel in years.

# Persuasion Jane Austen

In her signature satiric voice, softened to its subtlest pitch, Jane Austen shows how a life can be destroyed by denying one's heart and bowing to the opinion of a well-loved and respected friend. But this is Austen, so happy accident places her heroine in a position to right her former wrongs. Will she?



Keep on Reading

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### Wolf Hall Hilary Mantel

We all knew (or thought we knew) that Cromwell was brilliant, cunning, and careful—but Mantel, while holding fast to historical record, reveals a Cromwell whose famous qualities are steeped in a deep core of kindness and the capacity for generous love.

### Middlemarch George Eliot

No matter how many times I read this novel, I am fully caught up in the characters' lives—rooting for them, warning them, raging at them, urging them to make different decisions. Even so, though I know all the hills, valleys, twists, and, naturally, where the road ends, I can't resist taking the journey again.

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- 1. There are many secrets in *The Sisters*, beginning with Mabel's decision not to tell Bertie about Jim Butcher. In trying to understand her sister's behavior, fourteen-year-old Bertie wonders if "the things she didn't know were what kept her safe." What secrets do other characters keep, and how do you think the secrets ultimately help or hurt their loved ones?
- 2. How does the era in which each woman comes of age affect her experience and shape her outlook on what is possible?
- 3. How do the main characters perceive loyalty?
  Betrayal? What do you think of their perceptions?
- 4. How do Bertie's girlhood losses affect her daughters' and granddaughters' relationships with men?
- 5. Bertie, Alma, and Lynn are accused by other characters of being hard and cold. How do you see them? To what extent do you think they change in the course of the novel?
- 6. At the end of her life, Bertie struggles to cry out to Rainey and Lynn, *Forgive. Forgive.* Why do you believe some characters are able to forgive and others not? Do you believe everything can or should be forgiven?
- 7. What does the novel suggest about whether families are born or made?
- 8. When Daisy expresses her concern that Mabel is setting herself up for emotional pain by photographing young men bound for Vietnam, Mabel tells Daisy, "You can't protect yourself from loss." Do you think this is true? What happens to the characters in the novel, and to people in your experience, when they try?



Keep on Reading

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- 9. In her interview with Ed Bradley, Mabel says, "I don't think any real war [is ever over]—large, small, between countries, between people. Even the wars inside ourselves. Something always remains." Do you agree—in the novel and/or in real life?
- 10. The Sisters is structured as a series of chronological, interlocking narratives, sometimes with strikingly different perspectives of the same events. In what ways does this structure reflect the experience of an individual within a family?
- 11. Bertie tells Grace, "Something can happen to change your life so sudden, you can't get over it fast enough... and that changes things for them too, all in a line." Do you think that happens in most people's lives at one time or another? If so, is the chain reaction inevitable, or can someone choose to break the chain?
- 12. How were you affected when Bertie wrote Deceased on the letter from Mabel, and Mabel later decided not to follow up on Nick's possible lead about Bertie's whereabouts? Can you imagine either of them acting differently? Did you find the conclusion satisfying?

If you are interested in arranging for Nancy Jensen to participate in your reading group's discussion, please contact her at nancyjensenwrites@gmail.com.

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