

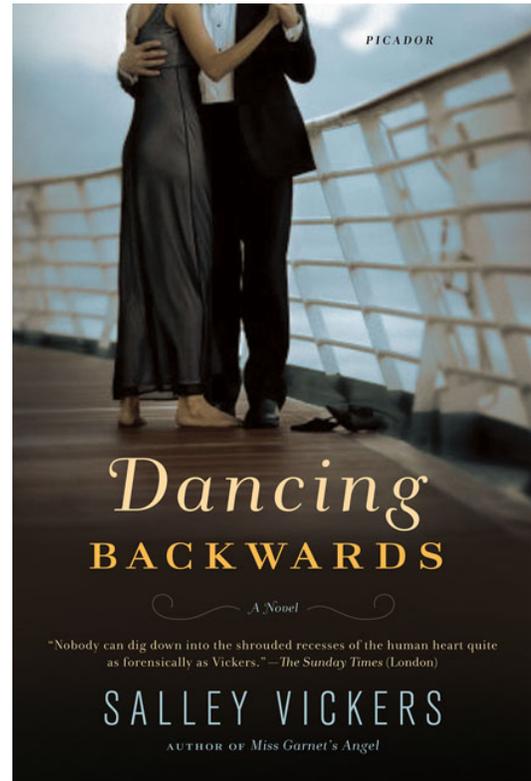
READING GROUP GUIDE

Dancing Backwards

A Novel

by **Salley Vickers**

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Dancing Backwards* 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 *Dancing Backwards*.

About the Book

Violet Hetherington, recently widowed, has taken the rash step of joining a transatlantic cruise to New York to visit Edwin, an old friend and long-ago lover. As she makes the six-day crossing, she relives the traumatic events that led to losing his friendship and abandoning her career as a poet for the safety of marriage. Moving between the late sixties and the present day, *Dancing Backwards* is written with the lightness of touch and psychological insight that characterizes

much of Salley Vickers's widely acclaimed work. This bittersweet novel is subtle, poignant, and wonderfully entertaining.

About the Author

Salley Vickers has worked as a dancer, an artist's model, a university professor of literature, and a psychoanalyst. She now writes full-time.

Discussion Questions

1. The novel is told in non-chronological order. How does this circular understanding of time reflect Vi's state of mind during the cruise? How do Vi's recollections of the past affect her desires and actions in the present day?
2. Both Vi and Des go by multiple names and nicknames. How do their different names connect to their sense of identity? Do their different names relate to different versions of themselves?
3. Vi encounters three very different married couples during her cruise: Martha Cleever and Dr. Balthazar (Baz) Lincoln; Ken and Jen Morrison; and Les and Valerie Garson. During the course of the novel, a member of each couple shares a secret with Vi. How do these secrets speak to the state of each marriage, and the nature of marriage in general?
4. Why do you think Vi stopped writing poetry? What significance does poetry play in her life and her sense of self?
5. The following Donne stanza proves important to Vi's relationship with Edwin:

*When love with one another so
Interinanimates two souls,
That abler soul which thence doth flow,
Defects of loneliness controls.*

Does Vi ever experience this connection with any character in the book? Do any of the characters experience this kind of emotional ecstasy? In your opinion, is this version of romantic love attainable?

6. Vi's initial feelings of repulsion towards Bruno quickly become those of romantic obsession. Why do you think this happens? What is the relationship between these two extreme emotions?

7. What role does dancing play in Vi's understanding of herself during the cruise?
8. Miss Foot tells Vi that the "true sin" in the world is the "refusal of grace and mercy." During the novel, when does Vi refuse grace or mercy? When does she choose to embrace both?
9. Miss Foot also tells Vi that "the destructive and the good...can...look alike." Which events in Vi's life seem good but turn out destructive? Which events seem destructive but turn out good?
10. Bruno keeps a kind of totem that he leads Vi to believe contains her soul. What other objects in the book serve as totems of Vi's identity? What does it mean that she allows herself to lose or misplace some of them?



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