1. Discuss Mrs. Daniels’s defense of romance novels: “The first thing that might happen to you is that people mock you for reading them. They think that women who read romances are idiots. I assure you, they are not…They are people who trust that love exists and that it is more powerful than bad logic or bad writing.” What do you think? Did *The Romance Reader’s Guide to Life* change your opinion of romance novels?

2. When Electra Gates meets Basil Le Cherche, her mood is that “of a huntress who, at the same moment that she understood herself to be engaged in a blood sport, felt that she was the hunted as well as the hunter.” She revels in these new feelings. Discuss the power dynamics within *The Pirate Lover* and how they compare to those within Neave and Lilly’s stories.

3. Neave tells us: “This was the first time in my life, listening to Mrs. Daniels with *The Pirate Lover* and *Leaves of Grass* all tangled up in my head, that I felt the truth of this—everybody died. Such a dark discovery, but also so wild and satisfying. There was a pull toward dark things in the poem and in the romance, both. What did it mean that there was this terrible sweet pull?” How is that “terrible sweet pull” explored in *The Romance Reader’s Guide to Life*? What is the connection between pleasure and danger for the various characters?

4. Neave’s mother often criticizes her daughter’s outspokenness and lack of femininity: “Happy women aren’t like that, Neave. They understand that others depend on them and they shape themselves to others. You’re just going to make yourself unhappy by insisting on your own way. Smart women don’t do that…You’re going to have to start damping yourself down. You’ll do yourself mischief if you don’t. You’ll end up alone. You’ll be too hard to love.” Discuss how this novel explores and subverts traditional gender roles. Would you consider it feminist?

5. Neave is shocked to learn that Snyder read *The Pirate Lover*, too: “My brother had turned the same pages that I had, but read an entirely different story.” Compare and contrast the romance novels and comics that are so important to the siblings growing up. Have you ever experienced men and women interpreting the same thing very differently?

6. From “Where She Is Now,” Lilly wryly remarks: “If you’ve never been treated like a goddess, I’ll tell you, it messes with your judgment. You forget, if you ever knew it to
begin with, that lots of goddesses end up sacrificed on some altar or other.” Do you agree? Can you think of a modern-day “altar” and a modern-day “goddess” who sits upon it?

7. Lilly tells Boppit: “Neave’s so vulnerable…You know that book she rereads every year? The one with the pirate? She actually thinks that that book is the truth: good triumphing over evil, love triumphing over everything.” He responds: “But that is the truth, Lilly.” Do you agree? Does The Romance Reader’s Guide to Life argue that good is the more powerful force in the universe, or evil?

8. Boppit argues that “glamour has always required a little touch of tramp. It’s why your ‘Fast Girl’ hot pink and ‘Vampy Red’ flew out the door. Every girl wants a little Pirate Lover in her life.” Be Your Best cosmetics is in large part about female empowerment, encouraging women to achieve success in business, but it stands out from its competitors largely because of its “bad girl” line of makeup. Are those contradictory impulses?

9. The Pirate Lover is very much Electra’s coming-of-age story: “That young woman was gone, and here in her place was a creature who could embrace both battle and lovemaking, and the only opinion in the world besides her own that swayed her was his—because he was hers, chosen with the full freedom of her heart and soul, given to him with the surging fullness of her own desires.” Discuss how her story’s resolution compares to Neave’s and Lilly’s. What can they teach us about the relationship between being in love and being independent?

10. The Romance Reader’s Guide to Life plays with genre in surprising ways, juxtaposing the romance novel with the more traditional historical narrative, and including a talking, cross-dressing dog and narration from the afterlife. Did this unconventional structure work for you? What does it suggest about the difficulty (or futility) of categorizing books or elevating certain genres above others?

11. In her author’s note, Sharon Pywell writes: “In Romancelandia, sex and power were tangled, even interdependent. But wasn’t that the way it really was? Weren’t they also linked in The Taming of the Shrew, in Wuthering Heights, in the evening news reports of recent domestic murders?” Neave discovers this, too, when she has similar kinds of revelations reading The Pirate Lover and books by Walt Whitman and Charlotte Brontë. Do you agree with the suggestion that romance novels are rooted in the classics, in some universally shared idea of the mating dance?