



"Destined to be a must-read book."

—*Strand Magazine* for *The Drowning*

if she were dead

a novel

J. P. Smith

Author of *The Drowning*

Reading Group Guide

1. What do you think was the author's purpose in writing this book? Is there a message you think he's trying to convey?
2. Amelie's affair with Ben, a married man, is morally questionable. At what point do you think she crosses the line? Do you think it is okay to have an affair out of love, like Richard and Sharon?
3. Ben is involved with three women: Amelie, Janet, and Janey. Are there parallels between these women? What are their key differences?
4. Infidelity is a strong current throughout this book. Do you think it's worse to be in Ben's position (married and having an affair) or Amelie's position (having an affair with a married person)? Are they comparable? Is one party less guilty than the other?
5. Amelie encourages emotional honesty with Nina but fails to share any of her own personal life. In what ways could Amelie have communicated with her daughter better? What

kinds of things should you share with a child who is grown up? Discuss how parenthood is portrayed in the story.

6. At forty years old, both Amelie and Janet struggle with the aging process. Describe what parts of getting older bother them the most and why. Do any of these bother you? Do you think they would bother you as much as Amelie and Janet?
7. Describe the way that Amelie and Janet's 'friendship' develops. Do you think Janet knew about the affair the whole time? What are her motivations in befriending Amelie?
8. As Amelie unravels over Ben and her new book, she starts to confuse fiction with reality. Can Amelie's narrative voice be trusted? In what ways do you think she's reliable? Are there parts of the book that make you question the story she gives you?
9. Amelie, Ben, Janet, and Richard are all deeply flawed characters. Do you find yourself sympathizing with any of them? In what ways?
10. Amelie's relationships with men are fraught with tension, starting with a father who abandoned her when she was a little girl. In what ways do you think this shapes her behavior as an adult? Can any of her actions be excused because of this?

11. Amelie worries that people in her community know about her affair with Ben. If you knew, would you feel responsible for telling someone that they're being cheated on? Why or why not?
12. Describe the moments in this book that you found most tense. What would you do if you were in Amelie's position? In Janet's?
13. What do you think happens to the characters after the end of the story? What do you think happens to Ben? What is Amelie planning?
14. Ultimately, do you think that Amelie is a good person? Why or why not?

A Conversation with the Author

Was it difficult for you, a man, to write a novel in which the main character is a woman?

I'd done it once before, in my fifth novel, *Breathless*. The main character in that book, a Boston-based historian whose husband has either been murdered or committed suicide, is distant and cool. Amelie is a more complex character with a wicked sense of humor and, of course, a vivid, sometimes fatal, imagination. I think—I hope—readers might enjoy being with her in these pages.

I've also been asked this question before in press interviews when *Breathless* was published in 1996, and as I pointed out then, male writers have often created memorable female characters: Flaubert and Tolstoy, just to name two—much greater authors than I, of course.

As with any protagonist, female or male, it's a matter of getting under the skin of the character, of living long enough with her to be able to bring her to life as an individual, working from the inside out. You may notice that apart from Amelie's blue eyes and blond hair I never physically describe her—I leave that up to the reader's imagination.

Why make your main character a writer? Doesn't a writer, well, just sit and write?

The question implies that writing is not an active occupation, that it's merely a matter of fingers on keys and tap-tap-tap several hours a day. In a way, that's one of the points of the book. Can writing break out of the imagination and the words and begin to alter reality? Can reimagining reality somehow lead us to bend it, break it, change it?

Amelie treats writing as a kind of weapon. She has her entire community under her fingers, drawing characteristics from people she sees every day, even from her ex-husband. It's only when she meets her lover's wife that, in her imagining, writing can create a whole new reality—and a possible new future. That's the game of What If, and all writers—indeed all human beings—play it. It's only when we act upon it that we tip into both obsession and then, sometimes, tragedy.

But being a writer comes into play in her affair with Ben. There Amelie has a second life—like a spy she has to create with him a whole new set of codes, alibis to be hauled out should they be seen together, and, in her case, the chance to create a future featuring Ben. In its own way, *If She Were Dead* is a tale of espionage and betrayal.

How did you go about writing *If She Were Dead*? Did you begin with a character, or was it a concept?

I'd begun writing the novel under a different title some twenty years ago. I had the ending first. It came to me in a flash: this combination of a woman's revenge and of trying to right history—and the future—in her favor. I thought of it then as a version of

the 1965 movie *Repulsion*, starring Catherine Deneuve, whose life in a London flat begins to fall apart—literally as well as figuratively. It was a kind of horror movie, really.

I'd return to the book at least once a year, refining the prose, tinkering with the plot, searching for the story that now stands. It was always moving towards becoming a psychological thriller. I now think of it as *Repulsion* crossed with *Big Little Lies*—the HBO series, not the book, which I haven't read. So that while Amelie's world is falling apart, she's also strong enough to deal with it in her own wicked way.

***If She Were Dead* is largely about a woman obsessed. How difficult is it to write about obsession?**

Not at all difficult. Obsession is, after all, what we find in literature. Hamlet is obsessed; Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment* is obsessed. So is Tom Ripley in Patricia Highsmith's series of books about him. Emma Bovary. Anna Karenina. Both profoundly obsessed characters, especially when it comes to the men they love.

Character must be action; a passive character is inert, it is someone to whom things happen, a kind of punching bag for the gods. Obsession drives a character, compels her or him to act in a certain way, whether logical or impulsive. And then the consequences come tumbling down.

What were your influences for this novel?

I think of this as my Beryl Bainbridge novel (I even named a street in the book after her). In her time she was quite famous, bringing out a book every year, and eventually becoming Dame Beryl Bainbridge. I'd read her 1974 novel *The Bottle Factory*

Outing and was immediately taken by how she balanced the black humor of the book with the growing horror of how the story was developing; something in common to many of her books. I corresponded with Beryl for a year before meeting her when I moved to London. One of the first things she said to me on our way up to her study was, as she pointed to a high corner in the stairway where what looked like a bullet hole could be seen: “That’s where my mother-in-law tried to murder me.” I’ve read all of her novels, and consider her a kind of secret influence on my own writing.

Finally, you chose a scene from an old movie, *Double Indemnity*, for the book’s epigraph. What made you choose it, and how does it relate to the novel itself?

Film noir, among other things, deals with passions gone awry due to misread cues, as one sees in the best of that genre, whether *Double Indemnity*, *In a Lonely Place*, or *Out of the Past*. I chose the scene I quote, in which Walter and Phyllis try to outguess each other, as a kind of comment on what we’re about to read: a novel in which each of the three main characters—Amelie, Ben and Janet—has his or her own scheme brewing. It’s just a matter of which one will succeed.