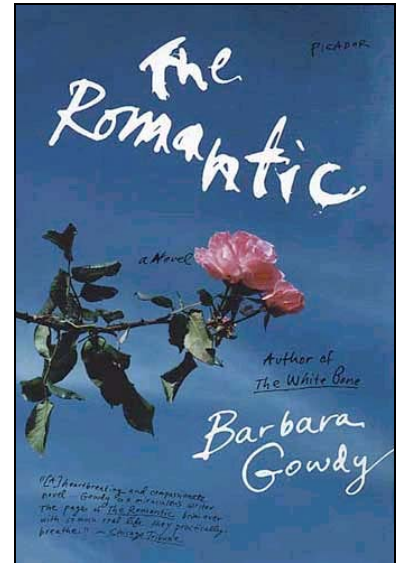


READING GROUP GUIDE

The Romantic

by *Barbara Gowdy*

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About this Guide

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

About the Book

From the author of *The White Bone*, a piercing novel of passionate attachment and of the fear and freedom of letting go.

Louise Kirk learns about love and loss at an early age. When she is nine years old, her former beauty queen mother disappears, leaving a note that reads only -- and incorrectly -- "Louise knows how to work the washing machine." Soon after, the Richters and their adopted son, Abel, move in across the street. Louise's immediate devotion to the exotic, motherly Mrs. Richter is quickly transferred to her nature-loving, precociously intelligent son.

About the Author

Barbara Gowdy is the author of six previous books, including *The White Bone* (Picador 0-312-26412-7), *Mister Sandman*, and *We So Seldom Look on Love*. Recipient of the prestigious Marian Engel Award, she lives in Toronto, Ontario.

Discussion Questions

1. How is the notion of the title of the novel explored in the book? What is Louise's idea of romantic love? Would you describe her love for Abel as obsessive? unconditional? ill-fated? Refer to Chapter

- 14, p. 103, where she declares her love and her loneliness inextricable. How would you categorize the other variations of love in the book -- Troy's for Louise, Mr. Kirk and Mrs. Carver?
2. Discuss the ways in which Louise is affected by the abandonment by her mother; how she transfers her affection to Mrs. Richter and longs to be her daughter (see p. 154). Talk about the theme of absent mothers in recent fiction like *THE SHIPPING NEWS* and *THE HOURS*.
3. The story of Heloise and Abelard is a much mythologized thirteenth century love story, based upon the letters said to be sent between the lovers from a monastery to a convent. (See pp. 88 and 91 for reference to Abel's letters to Louise.) What is the author implying here by naming her characters after these historic figures? Louise explains the difference between Heloise and Abelard's love for each other and theirs: that what destroys Louise and Abel comes from within, not from outside. (See p. 213). Is Louise and Abel's love as indestructible as the love of Heloise and Abelard?
4. Louise says that at age nine it had not occurred to her to blame, nor to defend, her mother. She never really wonders where her mother is. Why is that? (See Chapter 7). Again in Chapter 8, Louise says "I'll be 26 and Abel will be dead before I'll understand that even blame can be a memento." How does one immerse oneself in memory? Discuss the role of blame and of memory in Louise's development and coming of age.
5. In Chapter 11 Louise, deciding what to wear to church, chooses her mother's fox stole, then violently rips its head off. This is the first evidence we have of her anger toward her mother. In the church later that morning she realizes that she will never see her mother again. Discuss the ways in which anger is expressed in the novel.
6. Louise's loss of her mother is like a death. How does Louise react to loss, and how does this relate to the stages of grief? In Chapter 8, Louise's father goes from a storm of activity to recognition of the loss. Discuss how the various characters deal with their losses and how their responses manifest themselves in their behavior. (Louise, her father, Verna, the Richters, Mr. Fraser).
7. The novel gives a vivid and harrowing portrait of alcoholism. Did Louise and Abel's family do the right thing by not intervening more to help him? Louise's theory is that Abel's drinking enabled him to view life from a state so close to oblivion that it was pure; she calls him "fatally enlightened." See p. 105 and discuss how the author treats Abel's alcohol addiction.
8. What is the significance of the "Angel of Love" Louise refers to throughout the novel. (See Chapter 21). What does it have to do with replacing one love (for Mrs. Richter) with another (Abel). On page 163, Louise offers that the Angel might be caused by a disease that affects her peripheral vision. Why do the sightings of the Angel of Love stop right before Abel dies, and what do they stand for?
9. There are many instances of beautiful imagery recurring in the novel that evokes emptiness--some from dreams (See p. 36), with empty boxes within empty boxes, empty stadiums and empty chairs, etc. Discuss these images and what they might mean.
10. Louise moves frequently. At the end of Chapter 12, she describes the emotions summoned each time she leaves a flat or apartment; she feels as though the place itself failed her in its promise of peace and impregnability. How does this relate to the way Louise feels when she finds herself pregnant? Or the possibility of her mother having another baby?

11. Is Abel's death inevitable? (See Chapter 37). Louise gets him to describe (See pp. 254-66) his path of self-destruction. Discuss the psychological, emotional, and circumstantial reasons why Abel destroyed himself. Does Abel really want to die, to kill himself? Is he just pushing the limits to see what can happen, or is he so addicted that he no longer has a choice? (See Chapter 17 for Louise's observations and portrait of an alcoholic).

12. What is the significance of the two parting gifts given to Louise: the meteorite wrapped in the Rimbaud poem "Romance" from Abel, and her mother's rings and ashes.

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