

Discussion Questions for Dear Committee Members

1. How did you experience the book? Were you engaged immediately, or did it take you a while to “get into it”? How did you feel reading it?
2. Did you think that having a college education enhanced your enjoyment of the book? Explain.
3. Julie Schumacher, the author, says that by using the letter writing approach in the book she was freed up from describing the main character. How would you describe Professor Fitger? What do you think he looked like? What were some of his personality traits, motivations and inner qualities?
4. One of the biggest tasks for the letters was to create a main storyline – of Fitger, championing the literary efforts of one of his students, Darren Bowles. Why do you think Schumacher chose it for her storyline? How did it enhance your understanding of Professor Fitger?
5. Instead of a plot, the book has several themes: one of which is the state of higher education today. In some of his letters of recommendation Fitger shows his anger at the changes in higher education. What are some of the points he was trying to make in those letters?
6. Another theme that emerges is Schumacher’s theme about growing old and facing failure. How does she develop this theme? How does it affect your understanding of Fitger?
7. One reviewer remarked: “for all his corrosiveness, he (Fitger) is actually one of the good guys: a generous defender of gifted students, unappreciated colleagues and fine scholarship? Do you agree or disagree? Explain.
8. Julie Schumacher became the first woman to win the Thurber Prize for humor writing. The main criteria for the winning book is that “it cannot be mean-spirited. It needs to be in the Thurber tradition and Thurber’s humor was very smart and snarky.” What do you think the judges saw in this book to award it the Thurber Prize?
9. What was one of your favorite letters of recommendation?
10. What did you like or dislike about the book that hasn’t been discussed already? Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend?

FYI: The other two shortlisted books for the Thurber prize were also written by women: ***Can’t We Talk About Something More Pleasant*** by Roz Chast depicting her interactions with her parents in their twilight years and Annabell Gurwitch’s ***I See You Made an Effort: Compliments, Indignities and Survival Stories from the Edge of 50*** which is a collection of essays about ageing.

Questions developed from reviews about the book in The Guardian, The New York Times, NPR Books, Laura Collins-Hughes, FYI Book Club, Doubleday and The Rumpus.com. Additional questions from bookclubqueen.com, litlovers.com and bookbrowse.com