

Today Will Be Different : Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. The first part of *Today Will Be Different* is called "The Trick." In a later part Eleanor refers to "The Trick" and says, "Anytime I get into a one-on-one social situation, especially if there's something at stake, my anxiety spikes. I talk fast. I jump topics unexpectedly. I say shocking things. Right before I push it too far, I double back and expose vulnerability. If I see you about to criticize me, I leap in and criticize myself." Where did you see this happening in the book?
2. One reason that Eleanor has not been more present in her daily life is the anxiety she feels about writing her book and the dark cloud of avoidance that hangs over it. She is also very self-deprecating when she talks about herself. Are there times when her anxiety, avoidance or sarcasm makes her an unreliable narrator? Are there times when you've felt the same way about your own life?
3. Eleanor has a tempestuous relationship with her friend Sydney Madsen. Semple writes, "She's like Parkinson's, you can't cure her, you can just manage the symptoms." Do you have a friendship like this? Why do you think Eleanor feels that she has to maintain the friendship?
4. In the part titled, "The Flood Girls" Semple shows us the comic Eleanor wrote that is the inspiration for her book. In what way does seeing the comic, and learning more about Eleanor's past, help to illuminate her interior life?
5. Eleanor and Ivy are pulled apart by Bucky, the derringers, and the drama in New Orleans. Despite their differences, Eleanor desperately misses her sister. Were you surprised by the twists and turns that their relationship takes? Do you think they might one day be able to reconcile?
6. On page 194, reflecting on the crumbling state of her marriage, Eleanor is overcome with emotion when Timby states calmly, "That's just how you are." Throughout the novel, Eleanor explains herself as having a predictable and steadfast, albeit messy, personality. Are there aspects of one's character that are immovable? Does Eleanor need to change, or does she just need to accept who she is?
7. Throughout the story, Eleanor is trying to uncover Joe's secret. Were you able to predict what it would be? Or were you surprised by it? Why or why not?
8. Eleanor's poetry teacher, Alonzo, asks her to memorize Robert Lowell's "Skunk Hour" in advance of their lesson. At the end of the book, he assigns Elizabeth Bishop's "One Art." "Skunk Hour" was dedicated to Bishop, and Bishop and Lowell were close friends who had a deep influence on each other. How do you think these poems connect to the plot and to Eleanor's state of mind in *Today Will Be Different*?
9. "One Art" is famous for its opening lines: The art of losing isn't hard to master; So many things seem filled with the intent to be lost that their loss is no disaster. In what ways do you think that the poem connects to the lessons that Eleanor learns over the course of the book? What does she lose, and what does she gain? In what way does she have to master the art of losing in order to live her life more fully?
10. Eleanor composes a Gratitude List to help her maintain a loving relationship with Joe. She also creates a catalog of grievances in her mind. Are the grievances large enough to tip the scale? Can a marriage be quantified in the way?
11. Have you read Maria Semple's other novels (*Where'd You Go, Bernadette* and *This One is Mine*)? At what point did you realize that Eleanor is connected to Semple's other protagonists? Taken as a whole, what do you think Semple's books have to teach us about women and creativity?
12. *Today Will Be Different* begins and ends with Eleanor's incantation, "Today will be different. Today I will be present..." Why do you think Maria Semple chose to open and close the book with these words? How has Eleanor changed over the course of