

A READER'S GUIDE

MISTER
SANDMAN



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Much of the Canary family's life is built on deception. Using specific examples from within the book, discuss the different ways in which the family members deceive both each other and the outside world. What are some of the methods they use in their deceptions? Are there any members of the family who do not deceive people?
2. Margaret Atwood has written that in *Mister Sandman* Barbara Gowdy "gives us moments which are at the same time preposterous and strangely moving." Can you think of moments in the book that are at once unbelievably absurd and yet poignantly revealing? Does this technique add to or detract from your enjoyment and appreciation of the book?
3. Early in the book a doctor suggests that spanking Joan might cure her; he calls it "warming her fanny." Soon afterward, a neurologist tells Doris to think of Joan's apparent brain damage as "uncharted islands in a fathomless ocean." What do you think about Gowdy's dialogue in these instances? What is the tone — and what is the author's intent here? What do you think Gowdy is saying about the medical establishment

of that time? It is difficult to imagine a modern-day doctor voicing either one of those comments. In what other ways has society progressed since that period? The book covers several decades — are there other examples in it that illustrate the social advances of society?

4. Doris and Gordon engage in secret homosexual affairs while they are married. Discuss these affairs. Were they right to engage in them? Or should they have continued to repress their feelings? Do you think their desire to not break apart the family excuses their dishonesty?
5. Many of the Canary family member's sexual experiences are awkward and unpleasant at best. Talk about some of these scenes. Which struck you the most?
6. Throughout the book Doris deceives in different fashions. In the first pages of the book, she lies in order to win the *Queen for a Day* game show. Later, we learn on page 159 that, when younger, she spent hours deluding her co-workers about her personal life. These and other examples seem to show that she has not only a talent for deceit but also a love for it. Why do you think this is? Does it stem entirely from her unfulfilled theatrical ambitions, or are there other factors? Is she wrong to employ deceit? Can you think of other examples in the book where she does? Specifically, do you think she was morally right to lie on the game show in order to help her family?
7. The narrative, at different times, assumes the point of view of all the major characters in the book (that is, the Canary

family) — Gordon, Doris, Sonja, Marcy, and Joan. However, it is notable that Joan receives by far the least amount of space, just one several-page section in the book's middle. Why do you think Gowdy did this? What do we learn about Joan — and the family — during the brief segment devoted to her? Were you surprised by anything you read in this passage? Does this section help explain Joan's apparent desire for her family to hear her tapes?

8. *Mister Sandman* has no protagonist, no central figure that we can follow, but rather several equally important characters. What do you think about this choice by Gowdy? Do you feel that the narrative succeeds without a single clear protagonist? Is there anything that the multiple-point-of-view narrative achieves that would be difficult or impossible without it?
9. Marcy develops into a teenager who in many ways embodies our notion of the 1960's counterculture, particularly with her drug use and frequent sexual encounters. Yet at the same time she presents a very different image to the world by day, where she has a successful office job and a good salary. Interestingly, these two sides do not seem mutually exclusive, and she does not appear to have trouble balancing them. How does she reconcile these two halves — if she does at all? Do you think Marcy will ever choose one life or the other? Should she have to make this choice?
10. With her first boyfriend, Paul, Marcy decides that “the ideal of no secrets is more of a drug to Marcy than drugs.” Why do you think the idea of utter honesty is so intoxicating to her?

How does this scene — and her realization that occurs in it — fit in with the events that occur at the book's conclusion?

11. In one of the book's final scenes Gordon and Doris stand in the kitchen as Doris "cracks eggs into a bowl, one after another in a ruthless delirium." This action — and the tape-recorded exposure that lead up to it — is reminiscent of the saying "you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs." What do you think? Are the eggs that were broken by Joan's tapes worth the honesty and realizations that ensue? Or would the family have been better off without being exposed to each other? How important is privacy, compared to honesty?
12. Why do you think Joan spends so many years making her tapes and splicing them together? What goal does she have in mind? Do you think she is pleased with the results at the book's end?
13. The book concludes with the Canary family standing on their lawn at night, throwing a ball to one another. How did you read this scene? What do you think it suggests about the family's future?