

A READER'S GUIDE

*Playing  
House*

FREDRICA WAGMAN

ZOLAND BOOKS  
AN IMPRINT OF STEERFORTH PRESS  
HANOVER, NEW HAMPSHIRE

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. As a child, the narrator willingly breaks some of the greatest sexual taboos in our society. How do you feel toward her when reading these frank and vivid descriptions? Do they alienate you from her? Does the author want them to? Discuss some of the techniques and scenes that the author employs to reattach or increase your empathy for the narrator.
2. The narrator experiences periods of severe mental instability throughout the book. How would you characterize her state of mind? The other characters in the book understand her — to varying degrees. Do you feel you understand her?
3. One of the most noticeable literary devices the author employs is repetition; that is, much of the narrative is built by means of the repetitious layering of memories, events, scenes, words, and character descriptions. Rarely is something simply mentioned and then forgotten — rather, it is revisited, again and again. Can you find some examples where this takes place? Do you find it to be effective? Why do you think the author chose this technique?
4. The narrator says that the Turtle “couldn’t stand lies . . . to him a lie was just that, something untrue, evil, or wrong. But lies aren’t always, you know . . .” Who do you agree with? Do you think there is a danger in admitting a use for lies — a danger that allows them to be seen as increasingly harmless or even useful? What do you think about the narrator — is she essentially an honest person with herself and others? Does she lie to characters in the book? If not, are there times when she should?
5. Throughout the book the narrator expresses a wide range of emotions toward her brother. How do you feel about him? At times, she mentions his cruelty as a child, remembering how he would torture animals and at times hurt the narrator herself, such as when he would suddenly step on her hand while they walked. With moments such as these, is it possible to still like, and empathize with, the brother? Do you? If so, what details does the author use to balance these darker moments?
6. The narrator states, “I never had a brother, I had a lover. I never knew what the word ‘brother’ could mean, what the word ‘sister’ could mean, what the word ‘mother’ could mean — it was all meaningless to me . . .” Do you consider this lack of a “real” family

to be the main reason for the narrator's condition? If so, do you take this admission to be a simple statement, or to embody a judgment by the author on the importance of family?

7. In one of the most dramatic scenes in the novel, the narrator and her brother have a near-violent showdown when he visits her in the hospital. "Ask her," says the brother, "why she had to always keep on trying to outdo me. But I won't let her, I'll never let her. Tell her to keep her fucking hands off a typewriter. The theater is going to be mine. That's mine, do you hear me, little sister, that is mine and I'm not going to give it to you . . ." This scene is striking not only for the emotion, but also, ironically, for the normalcy — simple jealousy — that it brings to this abnormal relationship of brother and sister. Consider your own experiences with the jealousy and rivalry between siblings. Have you experienced, or heard of, similar quarrels? What would you do here, in the narrator's place? Would you listen to the brother or ignore his demand?
8. In part three, the narrator makes a strange request of golden archer man: "Would you lie on top of me and put your hand across my mouth to silence me, just for a moment, and if I close my eyes almost all the way, your yellow hair is all that I can see, just for a moment, will you?" With these words, the narrator expresses a desire to lapse into a fantasy-memory of her early sexual experiences with her brother. These words also imply that she has not gotten over either the experiences or her brother. Do you think she ever will? Do you think it is necessary, for the narrator's mental and physical health, for her to do so? Is it possible to live a regular life with such memories — and such feelings toward the memories?
9. The Turtle is a strange character, and he is hard to come to grips with. Do you think that the narrator herself ever comes to grips with him? He helps and supports her a great deal, and yet she expresses a feeling that this is not utterly selfless — that something about the Turtle likes his wife's helplessness, takes pleasure in it, and perhaps even needs it. Is this fair of the narrator? Do you think she is right? What do you think of the Turtle?
10. Part three opens with the remembered death of the narrator's daughter, and the departure of the Turtle, at which point she begins an affair with "golden archer man." Talk about these nicknames that the narrator comes up with for some of the men in her life. Do they personalize the subjects, or do they do something else? What are the

origins of the nicknames? Are there other places in the text where she “names” people, or is it just these two? And if the latter, does that naming seem to imply that there is something unique about the Turtle and golden archer man?

11. After the Turtle returns in part three and finds out about his wife’s affair, he remonstrates, “Couldn’t wait a couple of weeks. That’s all it was, baby, seven or eight weeks. Couldn’t wait, could you?” This re-injection of time into the text comes as something of a surprise to the reader, for during the Turtle’s departure the narrator’s words and actions create a sense of timelessness; more accurately, the narrative does not seem to move within the usual boundaries of time. Can you think of some other places in the text where this lack of concrete time is established? How does the author achieve this? Does such an effect fit in with what you know about the narrator?
12. The narrator frequently mentions that both she and others are unable to “catch the smoke.” What do you think she is getting at? Will she ever catch the smoke, or is that impossible to do?
13. At various points in the book, the narrator and her brother ask each other to come live in “a house on a hill by the sea.” Is this simply a fantasy left over from their childhood relationship, or is it a real and possible desire? The concept of fantasies often implies a state of bliss and pleasure that cannot be attained, and is not possible, in reality. Is this particular fantasy possible or likely? Do you think the narrator and her brother will ever end up in such a location? Would they be happy if they did? Consider that at the book’s end, the narrator’s husband — the Turtle — has left her, and the brother’s wife has left him. Will these siblings ever achieve a normal relationship? Or will their childhood always stand in the way of their lives apart from each other?
14. The book is titled *Playing House*. Why do you think the author chose this title? Do you think it pertains to the “house on a hill by the sea,” or their childhood house, or something else?