

Florence Gordon by Brian Morton ~ Discussion Questions

Please be aware that these questions contain spoilers!

Meet Florence Gordon: blunt, brilliant, cantankerous, passionate and feminist icon to young women, invisible to almost everyone else. At seventy-five, Florence has earned her right to set down the burdens of family and work and shape her legacy at long last. But just as she is beginning to write her long-deferred memoir, her son Daniel returns to New York from Seattle with his wife and daughter, and they embroil Florence in their dramas, clouding the clarity of her days and threatening her well-defended solitude. And then there is something strange going on with her left foot, which is starting to drag and interfere with her indomitable march forward through life. Defiant and determined, Florence can humble the fools surrounding her with one barbed line, but it turns out there are realities even she cannot outwit.

1. Why is Florence writing a memoir? What difficulties keep getting in her way?
2. Florence is often described in ways that make it clear she is a difficult person. She even leaves her own surprise party, preferring to go home and write. In your opinion, is Florence not a nice person, or is she simply being true to herself? Do you have to choose? How else does this question spring up in the novel?
3. On page 15, Janine recalls an essay in which Florence quotes a psychologist who said that "one is constantly confronted by situations in which one must make either a growth choice or fear choice." How does Florence respond to "opportunities for heroism" in her own life? Consider each of the main characters in the story and identify whether the choices they make are growth choices or fear choices.
4. How does Janine feel when she first sees Daniel after spending months apart from him? Describe her feelings for Lev — what attracts her to him? In what ways is he different from Daniel? Do you think Janine's affair is really about her feelings for Lev, or is it something else?
5. Time — particularly the passage of and the idea of freezing a moment — is a recurring theme in this novel. Discuss some of the ways in which the characters are affected by, reflect on, or rage against their lack of control over time. Describe how the relationship that each character has with time varies.
6. Though it's uncomfortable and even unnatural for her, under certain circumstances Florence is capable of showing concern for others and caring about their feelings (even if it's just an act). Identify some of these instances and discuss what they tell you about Florence.
7. Given her detachment and lack of concern for most other people in her life, why does Florence treat Saul with such patience and kindness? Why do you think she feels that "she was going to have to look out for him, as best she could, probably for the rest of her life"? (p. 116)
8. When Emily first begins researching as Florence's assistant, what surprises her the most? How does her work influence the way she feels about her grandmother and their relationship?
9. Florence's story as a leader of the feminist movement naturally raises many questions and ideas about gender roles and identity, among other issues related to sex. What, in Emily's opinion, makes Florence "a guy?" (p. 136) What other behaviors do the characters exhibit that may not fit with what you would typically believe about their genders? Discuss your feelings about the author being male and writing from the perspective of three female characters in light of this issue.

***Florence Gordon* by Brian Morton ~ Discussion Questions**

Please be aware that these questions contain spoilers!

10. On page 139, Emily muses that "each person is the center of a world." If that's true, describe the world that centers on each of our main characters: Emily, Daniel, Janine, and Florence.
11. What do you think sparks the shift in Emily and Florence's relationship? Why, of all three of her family members, is Emily the one with whom Florence actually feels a connection? What does Emily do that finally wins Florence's respect once and for all?
12. On pages 238 – 240, we "hear" a speech given by Willa purportedly in honor of Florence. What do you think the older women approaching the microphone afterward would have said had the sound not already been cut? Do you think the speech reveals a forward movement in women's rights or a gross misunderstanding of the issues? Support your opinion with examples from the book, if possible. Why does the speech make Emily so angry? How did you feel about it?
13. When Florence observes Emily through a restaurant window as she approaches their lunch date, she incorrectly assumes that Emily is consumed by shallow disappointment at not being able to attend a party. Florence thinks, "There had been times when she felt close to the girl, but not now. The little scene on the street, the phone pantomime, had reminded her of how far apart they were, in terms of how they lived and what they valued." (p. 268) Do you think Florence and Emily are as "far apart" as Florence thinks? Compare and contrast her situation with Saul to the relationship Emily is having with Justin, which in fact she ends in this scene as Florence looks on unaware. How is Emily's relationship similar or dissimilar to her mother's affair with Lev?
14. In Chapters 69 – 71, the author moves back and forth between Emily's and Daniel's points of view during the same scene. Identify and discuss other such moments in the novel when the author utilizes this technique. Do they have a common theme? Why do you think the author chose this approach with some moments but not others? What does this segment between Emily and Daniel in particular reveal through the juxtaposition?
15. How do you feel about the novel's ending? Emily thinks that, "she kept expecting her [Florence] to come back and say more." (p. 306) Do you agree? Do you think the novel could have ended any other way and still been true to Florence's character? Why or why not?