



Reading Group Guide

The Conditions of Love

Discussion Questions

1. Within the first paragraphs, we learn a great deal about our narrator, Eunice. What is the author setting up for Eunice in these pages and how does it forecast her future?
2. Eunice experiences terrible loss and tragedy in her life, yet she not only survives, she thrives. What characteristics does she possess to allow her to do so?
3. In what ways does *The Conditions of Love* mirror the classic hero/heroine's journey? Do you think the journey is intrinsically different for men and women?
4. How does the setting—a small Midwestern town in the 1950s—contribute to understanding the choices Eunice makes? How would setting the novel in 2014 make it a different story?
5. How does Eunice's imagination help her negotiate loss?
6. What is this book telling us about the intertwining of love and loss?
7. What is the role of memory and false memory in *The Conditions of Love*?
8. What is role the natural world played in shaping Eunice's character?
9. In the beginning of the novel, Mr. Tabachnik introduces Eunice to opera. In speaking about opera he says, "but from the terrible, beautiful can come." What resonance do those words have for Eunice as her life unfolds?
10. Mr. Tabachnik and Rose are both wisdom figures, but of very different sorts. How are they similar and how are they different?

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- In what ways do they complement each other? What aspects of wisdom do they represent?
11. What does Eunice Turtle tell us about the way animals, and specifically pets, shape and ground us? 01
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 12. What are the different types of love the book presents? How are they different, similar, and to what degree are they mutually exclusive? 03
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 13. Mern is a difficult mother, yet Eunice loves her. Why do some children reject difficult mothers like Mern and others do not? What qualities does Eunice possess that enable her to love and forgive her mother? 08
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 14. Movies and movies stars are important to Mern. Why? How do the movies bring Eunice and Mern together? How does Mern's obsession with movie stars bring about a split between Eunice and Mern? 12
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 15. What different aspects of "the father figure" were represented by Frankie, Sam, Marcus, and Fox? 16
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 16. Compare Eunice's mourning of Sam, Mern, and Frankie. 18
 17. What aspects of mothering does Rose give Eunice that Mern cannot? 19
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 18. How does Mr. Tabachnik's experience of suffering differ from Eunice's and how are they similar? 21
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 19. Why was CC so attached to Tooty? Did she identify with him in some way? If so, how? What does the Wednebach family represent and how does Eunice's staying with them contribute to her self-discovery? 23
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 20. Mern says to Eunice, "Who wants to be normal?" In what ways is being "different" explored in the novel? 27
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 21. Why does Eunice leave Rose for Fox? How does Eunice's leaving Rose contribute to her own development? 29
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 22. How has reading *The Conditions of Love* changed your perceptions about love? 31
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 23. What role does the past play in each character's life? Do the characters' back stories help the reader understand their actions in story-present? Explain. 33
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24. How does Fox's revelation about Iris help the reader understand his attraction to Eunice?
25. What role does Fox's accident play in equalizing his relationship with Eunice? Why does Eunice stay with him?

A Conversation with **Dale Kushner**

Q: THE CONDITIONS OF LOVE is your first novel. Did you always know you wanted to write? What made this moment right for your debut?

A: I never thought of becoming a writer until after I was married and had children, but I'd read voraciously as a child and reading saved my life. Luckily, I lived in a house filled with books, a strange mixture of highbrow and lowbrow stuff. We also had a set of World Book encyclopedias given to us by a wealthy cousin, which I pored over. Many writers, myself included, attached themselves to books early on, but not every ferocious reader becomes a writer. One of the things that probably contributes to the transformation from reader to writer is the presence of an inner pressure that seeks expression in language. I think it's the unsayable demanding to be said. When I acknowledged this demanding spirit, I signed up for an MFA in poetry. Sometime after I graduated, I realized I needed a more expansive format than lyric poetry and turned to fiction.

Q: At the beginning of your book the protagonist, Eunice, is a young girl. Did you find it challenging to write from the changing perspective of a girl as you followed her story into young adulthood?

A: Eunice's evolving consciousness occurred organically. Her childhood loneliness, her sense of being an outsider, and her sensitivity

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were evident at the beginning. During her time with Rose, her voice began to change. I could feel her struggling to let go of her mother and to become an adult, but she'd lapse into grief and nostalgia. (She heard Mern's voice in her head.) One of the novel's themes is how the past continues to shape us. I wanted to chart the difficulties we encounter as we struggle to separate from our families and assume our individual nature. By the time Eunice moves in with Fox, she's on the cusp of being a woman. One thing I had to remain aware of while writing is that the fifties was a more innocent time. By "innocent" I mean children were not as worldly or psychologically savvy as they are now. The perimeters of their experience were narrower. The challenge was to make sure Eunice remained a child of her time and not to endow her with twenty-first-century sophistication.

Q: From the title, readers can already tell that THE CONDITIONS OF LOVE has a central theme of the power of love in our lives. But what they might not realize is that you address many varieties of love, not just romantic. Can you tell us a little about the various kinds of love you explore in this story and how the type of love we seek evolves over time as we age and mature?

A: A friend once said, "Earth is a heart ward and we are all here to heal from the wounds of love." That sounds pretty accurate to me! Eunice is a student of love. While she suffers under her mother's capricious care and watches her ruin one relationship after another, Eunice remains loyal to Mern until her own life is endangered. Eunice's charm and winning personality endear her to Sam and Mr. Tabachnik, who provide both the maternal nurturing and paternal wisdom she needs. All these characters, including Eunice's absentee father, form an interconnected web in which not only the light but also the shadowy aspects of love—jealousy, betrayal, abandonment—are played out. Our human nature is full of contradictions; the difficult aspects of love are part of the human condition. And I'm not only talking about the dark side of romantic love, but the negative aspects alive in friendship and kinship. Rose, too, supplies Eunice with good mothering, but the quality of love between Eunice and Rose is the affection of a student for a cherished teacher or guru.

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01 That Rose's love for Eunice is tinged by her own losses reminds us that
 02 even the wisest among us carries bits of love's shrapnel. With Fox, Eunice
 03 discovers Eros—desire—and uncovers her artistic nature, which is home.
 04 Maybe searching for love *is* searching for the thing we call home—the
 05 place where we belong and where we feel whole.
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07 **Q: Eunice is a complex character who experiences many unique**
 08 **circumstances before she even turns eighteen. Some of the events**
 09 **of her young life are hard to imagine (such as experiencing a**
 10 **flood and losing a parent, just to name two), but you describe**
 11 **them so vividly! Is any part of this book based on your personal**
 12 **experiences?**

13 **A:** The novel is entirely fictional. I didn't lose a parent while I was
 14 growing up, but my father had a heart attack when I was nine. I found
 15 him unconscious and thought he was dead. He actually lived another
 16 twenty years, but my world was forever after altered.

17 I've never lived through a flood. In Wisconsin we get tornadoes.
 18 The sky flips upside down and turns a wicked purple-green. I've read
 19 accounts of the devastations—cows stuck in trees! Growing up in
 20 New Jersey, we had hurricanes. One blew my father down the drive-
 21 way like a piece of paper while he was trying to bring in the garbage
 22 cans. Some of Eunice's experiences may seem fantastical, but then life
 23 is more fantastical than we choose to believe.
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25 **Q: THE CONDITIONS OF LOVE is as much a book about love**
 26 **as it is about loss. It seems that Eunice often learns what she needs**
 27 **from a relationship (be it with a pet, a parent, a friend) only once**
 28 **it's gone. Do you see the two as inherently intertwined?**

29 **A:** Everything and everyone we love will pass away. Our most dif-
 30 ficult lessons in life revolve around love and loss; we are continually
 31 buffeted between the two. The Buddhists teach that our attachment
 32 to what is impermanent causes us suffering, and yet we continue
 33 to love despite the awareness of our mortality. Eunice is heroic in
 34 her loving. She may have been born under the wrong star, but she
 35 never withdraws, never becomes embittered, never closes her heart.





Mr. Tabachnik states it best: From the terrible the beautiful can come. Without the belief we can transform and transcend our sorrows, I don't know how any of us could go on.

Q: The power of the imagination is a major theme in your book. Eunice has many ongoing conversations with her absent father as well as her pet turtle, neither of whom can talk back to her. Why is imagination so important to Eunice? What do you think it gives her? What do you think it prevents her from seeking outside herself?

A: Imagination is our saving grace. It acts as a complementary mode of perception to our rational, linear-thinking brains. It conjures new forms and possibilities out of the unknown and dreams us into new ways of being. In Eunice's case, imagination is one of the tools she uses to survive her despair. Through imagined dialogues with her lost father she intuits his true nature and resolves to let him go. When she imagines conversations with her pet turtle the loneliness of her present reality lifts. Later in the book, Rose appears at crucial moments of danger and offers help. In my thinking, the membrane between imagination and the visionary can be very thin.

Q: When Eunice discovers a romantic love interest, he becomes a bit of an obsession that overshadows other relationships in her life. Do you think that is simply the natural progression of a teenage girl's emotional development, or do you think Eunice is hoping that romantic love will make up for other absent loves (familial, etc.) in her life?

A: An interesting question. I don't believe one aspect of love substitutes for the absence of another kind of love, though certain deficits in childhood might later induce us to make choices that reduce the pain of the initial loss. But then I wouldn't call that choice "love" as much as psychological reparation. It's true that Eunice is at first mesmerized by Fox, but her feelings are more than a teenage crush. She's enchanted, and the enchantment blossoms into a lasting love. Fox is equally obsessed with Eunice. Through loving her, he manages to transform a long-held

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grief from his own childhood. Eunice and Fox embody a true love story, one that adapts to brutal changes through resilience, devotion, friendship, compassion, and erotic love. Eunice and Fox live according to their own unconventional rules. Together they create a world.

Q: What writers have inspired or influenced your work?

A: I read widely and wish I had more time to read. I've been a huge fan of Hilary Mantel's for a very long time and am glad to see her work honored now. Other authors who've been important to me are Jean Rhys, Elizabeth Bowen, and Marquerite Duras. The work of Toni Morrison and Louise Erdrich inspires me and is also crucial to our understanding of ourselves as a country. The Israeli author David Grossman breaks my heart. Michael Ondaatje is a wonder. All these writers are superb storytellers but they also love language, its rhythms and song, which is evident in their prose. Poetry and nonfiction have influenced me as well. Where would I be without Rilke and Adrienne Rich and Carl Jung?

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