

When Mermaids Sing

Discussion Guide

Book clubs who choose the novel may want to use the following questions to facilitate discussion on the structure and content of the book.

1. The reader sees everything that happens in the story through Larry's eyes? How likely is it that the reader is receiving an "objective" account of all of the events? Identify a couple of circumstances where one might suspect that Larry is "slanting" what he sees?
2. The reader never has a chance to get inside the mind of any of the other characters. Do you think that Larry's description of these characters gives an accurate depiction of them? Look at one of the scenes involving Millie and imagine how it would be depicted if Millie were recounting it? What would be the most notable differences between Larry's version and Millie's version?
3. Can anyone be so horrible a person as Millie? Consider the view you get of her parents at the Dean's party. What do you think Larry might not be telling the reader about Millie?
4. In the first half of the book, there is a great deal of interaction with Hal. In the second half, Hal becomes a background character and more attention is focused on Bradley. Why do you think the author caused this split? Compare the way Larry depicts Hal with the way he later depicts Bradley.
5. Who or what is Misha?
6. The title of the novel, *When Mermaids Sing*, refers ostensibly to both the John Donne poem quoted at the front of the book and to TS Eliot's poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. What do you think are the impossibilities in the novel? Do you think the reference to Eliot's poem creates a foreboding about what will happen to Bradley? What other themes from mythology are raised by the reference to mermaids?
7. What happens to Bradley after Larry leaves the Cape?
8. What is suggested in the story by the references to *The Fall of Icarus*? Are there any characters in other novels that remind you of Larry?
9. When Larry gets back to Boston, does he call Bradley's parents and tell them what has happened? If not, should he?

10. Do you think Larry compromised his principles by teaching the Asimov story when the school board member came to visit (rather than material not on the official curriculum, such as *Siddhartha*)? What will Larry do about his tenure contract? How are the choices that Larry must make at the end of the novel similar to the ones Bradley must make? How are they different?