

Reading Group Guide

This is a True Story: An Essay from the Author

As a novelist, the one question I am asked all the time is if my books are based on my own experiences. I suppose this is because the novels I have published (although not all the novels I have written) are narrated in a first-person female voice, so they feel more intimate, and thus more likely to have been drawn directly from real life. Or maybe it's because conceptually, the imagination is slippery, and it's easier to grasp where stories come from if you know they are based on actual events. Whatever the reason, readers are always curious to find out which parts of my novels are real versus which parts I've made up.

Here is the short answer: none of the events that occur in *I Couldn't Love You More* actually happened. However, within this invented, self-contained universe, everything in this story is true. In other words, I personally have never experienced the *Sophie's Choice* moment¹ that occurs at the book's halfway point, nor do I know anyone who has. However, if I have done my job correctly, every detail in this novel, including how the characters look, feel, act, and react will be consistent; that is, true to the way I, the writer, envisioned them and you, the reader, ex-

¹ Spoiler alert.

perience them. Furthermore, I am none of these characters, and I am all of them. Like Eliot, I have one daughter and two stepdaughters. Like Dolores, I am a writer who has seen her share of rejection. Like Sylvia, I can be bossy. Like Maggie, I often say dumb things. But I live and work in New York, not Atlanta. All three of my daughters attend public school, as did I. My girls are nothing like Eliot's girls, physically or temperamentally, nor is their father (my real-life husband) anything like Grant. I did have a big love in college, but he didn't love me back.² In the press, reviewers have referred to the autobiographical thrust of my novels, which both is and isn't accurate. Maybe, like Eliot, I am both a mother and stepmother. Maybe my sometimes-red hair is very thin and getting thinner. Maybe I do work hard to protect my daughters and to ensure that each feels as loved as the others do. But *I Couldn't Love You More* is an extended "what if?" and how well it succeeds as a novel depends on how much of it you believe. So, if you believe the whole book, then I have in fact written a true story.

I Couldn't Love You More, like all of my novels, was born of rage and frustration. Although the reasons for my rage differ from book to book, the underlying motivation is always the same: to have my say, usually about someone who has wronged me.³ In this case, I was bitterly angry that my career as a published novelist was over, and more important, that it wasn't my choice. Prior to this book, I spent six years on a novel that I deemed *The Masterpiece*. It was the book that Dolores refers to in Chapter 31, the one that was supposed to prove my worth as a writer of serious literary fiction. It had multiple points of view. It went back and forth in time. It revealed unspoken truths about the human con-

2 Well, he did, but not publicly, which is a whole other, different kind of book.

3 To clarify: nine times out of ten, the people who wrong me have no idea. Although I burn with the heat of ten thousand suns, I do this silently. Most people will tell you that I am painfully shy and overly nice (too nice, sometimes), but only my closest friends (and now you) know that I can also be opinionated, competitive, and when it comes to writing, very critical of myself and others. However, because I rarely articulate my truest thoughts (not out of fear but because it's not nice), I need some way to express them.

dition. Seriously, though, I believed in the book so deeply, I genuinely thought it would change my life. Unfortunately, despite several editors “admiring”⁴ it, no one wanted to buy⁵ it, and now the book sits, dead, on my hard drive. Although my work had been rejected countless times before, this particular rejection flattened me. For weeks, I couldn’t stop crying.⁶ I couldn’t write; I could barely read. I was ashamed of my failure, of my sorrow—it was just a book, after all—and my hubris. A few weeks passed, during which I contracted *E. coli* and spent a week in the hospital.⁷ It was time, I decided, to quit the writing life for good.

The truth about writing fiction is that no one asks you to write, and no one cares if you do. In fact, very often it feels as though people are actively arguing against it. As an artist, then, your challenge is to create despite (or in my case, because of) the world’s indifference and opposition. To make art is a very lonely, very isolating enterprise. Believe me, I would much rather watch crime shows and British period dramas⁸ than stare at a computer all day. But I am a writer, which means that even if I have just spent five years working on a dead book that no one wants to read, much less buy, I will sit down and do it again, and again, and again. Why? Because the world is an absurd, chaotic place, and my books help me make sense of it. Writing is what keeps me tethered. When I’m not engaged in a novel, ambient sounds become deafening. There are too many sharp corners. Time moves at a dull, languid pace. I feel too present, too large and ungainly. But when I’m working, the

4 An editor “admiring” your book is very different from him or her lobbying their publisher to purchase it.

5 “Buy” and “publish” are used synonymously. In general, when an author says she “sold” her book, she means sold to a publisher (versus to a reader).

6 I always wanted to say I “couldn’t get out of bed” because it’s much more dramatic than “I cried,” but I’ve held a corporate job since college, so not only did I get out of bed, I also took my kids to school, went to work, made dinner, and everything else a working mother does in the course of a day. I was very sad, though—just also very busy.

7 This detail has no bearing whatsoever on this story. I just think it’s interesting. PS—to this day, I have no idea how I got it.

8 Have you seen *The Wire*, *The Killing*, and *Downton Abbey*? I loved them all, as well as every episode of every version ever taped of *Law & Order*.

loud noises are muffled, the edges smoothed out, and everything is cast in soft focus. Writing well feels like moving through water. It's easy, endlessly satisfying, often exhilarating, and I can lose eight, ten, twelve hours at a clip.⁹ Writing novels is like having a conversation with every person who has ever burned you, except you are the only one talking, so you can finally express all that built-up resentment and sorrow. For someone who rarely had her say growing up, this is a very heady, very powerful feeling.¹⁰

I am the eldest daughter of a traveling salesman who moved his family seventeen times by the time I was seventeen. At the end of the tenth grade, we ended up in Atlanta, where this novel is set.¹¹ After high school, I studied writing on scholarship at a fancy private college¹², and then struggled to pay for a top MFA program while working full-time. In graduate school, I discovered I was a terrible editor, and had to first relearn how to read before I could then relearn how to write. Most of the writers I went to school with were talented, many far more talented than I, but talent, we all found out, was the easy part. To actually succeed as a writer (and everyone defines "succeed" differently), you have to be able to sit down and write even when you think you suck, even when you're told you suck.¹³ Back then, I doubted myself at every turn, but to not try to succeed seemed worse somehow than failing. At first, I was shredded every week, but I burned with righteous indignation, and wrote and rewrote, read and reread, edited and reedited, and graduated with a thesis (my first real novel) that I sold two years

9 Conversely, when my work isn't going well, it's like living with a caged animal that hasn't eaten in days.

10 Again, conversely, when you write a book that doesn't sell (see paragraph three: The Masterpiece), it's as if you just had your say but no one was listening, so your words are forever left hanging in the air, like a cartoon balloon.

11 Spoiler alert.

12 This is only partially true. My parents were able to pay for a portion of my first two years of college. However, this detracts from the inspirational poetry of my personal history.

13 On the other hand, what do I know? Maybe you do suck. In that case, you should probably quit.

later to a high-flying editor for a lot of money. There was a feature-film deal, trips to California, book parties, movie premieres, invitations to write for TV, dinners with celebrities. Most of all, though, there was the promise of a grand life ahead—a real writer's life—which makes what happened next even more poignant: My agent couldn't sell my second book. My third book sold and promptly tanked. I couldn't sell my fourth, and I spent the next ten years writing novels and submitting, getting turned down, trying again, failing again. I was exhausted, bitter, resentful and then finally, finished. The irony, of course, is that throughout these painful, punishing years, it turned out I had been living a real writer's life, after all.

Here is another truth about writing: you are rejected, in one way or another, every single day. I graduated from college in 1985, and since then, as I said, I have worked (almost) full-time at an anonymous, old-fashioned, nine-to-five corporate job.^{14,15} So for the whole of my writing life, I worked and went to work. While my friends went to bars, hooked up, got married, and had children, I worked and went to work. Eventually, I had children and got married, too, but I continued to work and go to work—and I continued to get rejected Every. Single. Day. Despite all the rejection, though, the idea that anyone—agent, publisher, reviewer—could say anything that would make me stop is beyond my comprehension. I may never be considered a literary icon, but my art is my art and I work hard at it constantly, trying to understand why some novels succeed and others end up, dead, on a hard drive.

A few months after I put *The Masterpiece* away, I briefly considered

14 For the record, it is not the same job that Eliot has. Therefore, none of the policies or practices of the companies for which I've worked over the years are reflected in this book. (This disclaimer just cracked me up.)

15 One more point about my corporate career: after college, I made the conscious decision to have a stable job, so I wouldn't have to rely on my fiction to pay my rent. This was largely out of fear but also practicality. Now, though, I spend countless hours wondering if I would be more successful if I wrote full-time, or if I would just fritter that time away, watching crime shows, chewing Klonopin, and trolling the Internet for celebrity mug shots. Hard to say.

writing an autobiographical essay for an anthology about dating.¹⁶ Around this time, there was a proliferation of memoirs and anthologies on the market, and writing a simple, short memoir-like piece seemed like a relatively painless way to, if not make money (it wouldn't pay much), then at least to get published. In the end, I decided against it, particularly after I read several essays that focused not just on the writers but also on their children. Some topics were mundane—behavior issues, picky eating habits. Others, though, were bombshells—ultra-feminine boys who dressed up in girl's clothing, ten-year-olds confronted with their mother's suicidal impulses. Still more were blatantly exploitative—daily blogs that chronicled an unknowing child's every movement. As I read these deeply intimate stories, I was distracted, wondering how these children reacted, or would react, when they realized the extent to which their mothers (and fathers, although mostly mothers) had mined their young lives for material. Would they feel powerful or powerless? How might it affect them later on? Were certain details too personal to include? If so, what details were left out? I admit that I also felt dirty, as though by reading these pieces, I had colluded with these writers in some unhealthy, even irrevocably destructive way.¹⁷ So, for-

16 When I say "briefly," I mean I considered this for maybe sixty seconds. Although I have no problem with other people revealing intimate details about themselves in print (and God knows I love to read them—the more intimate and twisted, the better), I am extremely uncomfortable revealing my own (this essay is no exception). Furthermore, I don't like to call attention to myself (it's one reason I didn't have a wedding), and despite what may happen in my fiction, I am not a particularly interesting person, nor is my actual day-to-day life worth writing about.

17 To clarify: This is not a value judgment. As a writer, I believe everything—and everyone—I come in contact with is material, and I will use whatever strikes me with absolutely no remorse. (The other question I'm always asked is where I get my ideas. The truth? At the dinner table, during family vacations, and eavesdropping on other people's conversations.) However, I'm a novelist not a memoirist, so I reweave real life into a tangle of fiction. I also have very puritanical ideas about protecting my own children's privacy. My writing is my choice, not my daughters', and I owe them respect and discretion as long as they are still young and defenseless (or at least until they really piss me off). So reading these essays and blogs about real-life children written by their real-life parents stopped me in my tracks. I was infinitely curious about the backstory behind each essay as well as the larger implications of being raised by a writer in the age of compulsive over-sharing. And in the absence of any real answers, I felt compelled to start writing again.

getting that I had just quit the writing life, I sat down and wrote a scene in which the adult daughter of a memoirist describes how it felt to be the subject of her mother's books: "When your mother is a writer, you are more than just a daughter; you're an endless source of material." This was the beginning of what would eventually become *I Couldn't Love You More*, the novel you are now holding in your hand.¹⁸ And *voila*, just like that, I had un-quit. And *voila*, just like that, here we are.¹⁹

Despite my perpetual self-doubt and self-criticism, I am proud of *I Couldn't Love You More*, largely because it isn't only a fictitious story about fictitious people. This novel, like all novels, also carries with it every second of the honest-to-God, real-life events that led up to its publication—books written, books published, books sitting, dead, on a hard drive. That I have recounted these events, however, is a departure for me. I have been taught, and thus, always believed that my personal history is superfluous, that the artist's life should remain separate from the art. But times have changed, and maybe now that you know the history of this novel, your experience of reading it will be a richer, deeper, more resonant one. If nothing else, I promise you that all my stories are true. I sincerely hope you believe them.

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18 Weird, isn't it, how ideas originate? At first glance, it would seem that this novel started with Eliot and her children, but it actually grew out of her relationship with her mother. In fact, Dolores was the very first character, and the book's central conflict revolved around her college-age daughter's inability to express anger at what she felt was her mother's betrayal of her privacy. After a solid eighteen months of crafting endlessly boring scenes, I realized this conflict wasn't enough to drive an entire novel. So I took a different tack, which was to make the daughter older and a mother herself. My own daughters were growing up (quickly, quickly), and since two of them also have another mother whose ideas about raising children differ greatly from mine, it made sense to put Eliot in a similar situation so that I could explore these very complicated issues fictively. Eventually, as I wrote about Eliot's inherent goodness, a new central conflict—a mother being forced to choose between two children—slowly evolved, organically, from her need to be all things to all people. What if she couldn't? I wondered. What if she really had to choose?

19 Five years after I wrote that first scene, ten years after my second book came out, but yes, here we are.

Discussion Questions

1. One of the many themes in *I Couldn't Love You More* is the idea that the choices we make have consequences that reverberate long into the future. How do each of the characters' choices impact what happens in the book? Do you think the consequences of their choices will have a long-term effect? Have any of the choices you've made in your own life had long-term consequences? Did you ever make a decision you wished you could undo?
2. Eliot is the eldest of three sisters, each of whom has her own distinct personality. Do you think their personalities are a result of their birth order? How do their personalities change over the course of the book? When you were growing up, how did birth order affect you and your siblings?
3. At the beginning of the book, Eliot refers to herself as a "good girl." Given what happens in the novel, is she a reliable narrator? What does it mean to be "good" in the context of the story? Is Eliot a "good" mother? Is Beth? Is Dolores? Conversely, is Sylvia a "bad" girl? Do you think she will be a "bad" mother?
4. When Finn shows up in Eliot's life, she is left very unsettled. Do you think their relationship was as unresolved for him as it was for her? In general, do you think women pine for men more than men pine for women, or is it mutual? Do you wonder about anyone from your own past? What do you think would happen if he/she showed up?
5. Early in the book, Eliot discusses the concept of having a favorite child. When you were growing up, did you feel there was a favored child in your family? How was this manifested? If you have children of your own, do you find it hard not to play favorites?
6. In the first half of this novel, the story focuses on Eliot's relationships with her sisters, her husband Grant, and her ex-boyfriend Finn. By the midpoint, the story veers off in a different direction. Did the book's climax catch you off-guard, or were you expecting

- it? In what other ways did the novel overturn your original expectations?
7. The central conflict of this novel revolves around Eliot having to make an unfathomable choice between two children. Can you imagine making a similar choice or is this simply unimaginable?
 8. In most of the stories we read, stepmothers are depicted as selfish women who resent their stepchildren. In *I Couldn't Love You More*, the author introduces a stepmother who genuinely loves her stepchildren and does her best to care for them. Is this a realistic portrait of a family, or is it idealized? Are you a stepparent? If not, do you know any blended families? Do blended families have the same types of issues as regular families? In what ways do they differ?
 9. The narrator uses humor throughout the book, even in very dramatic scenes. Does this enhance or detract from the story? Do you prefer books that are either very funny or very sad, or do you like a combination of both?
 10. Eliot's mother, Dolores, is a memoirist. In this novel, Eliot discusses how ashamed she felt as an adolescent knowing that her mother wrote about her family's personal lives. Have you read any memoirs in which an author discusses his or her living family members? What do you think about this? Does a memoirist have a responsibility to tell the truth, regardless if the person he or she is writing about gets hurt, or are some details better left unsaid?
 11. In this novel, the author explores the idea of personal privacy. At one point, Eliot and her stepdaughter Charlotte argue about Charlotte's Internet usage. Eliot believes that posting personal details on the Internet is dangerous and destructive, whereas Charlotte simply sees it as a means of communicating with her friends. Do you think Eliot is overreacting, or do you think she is justified? Do you and/or your children use social networking sites? Why or why not?
 12. Late in the novel, when Eliot rereads her mother's memoirs, she

says the experience of reading them as an adult was entirely different than reading them as an adolescent. Why do you think this is? As an adult, have you reexperienced any of your favorite childhood books or movies? Did they seem different from when you read/saw them years ago?