



Landscapes

A NOVEL

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Reader Guide: Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Philosopher Henri Bergson's theory of "*durée*" was explained as: "usually when we speak of time we think of the measurement of duration, and not of duration itself. But this duration which science eliminates, and which is so difficult to conceive and express, is what one feels and lives." — Discuss how the epigraph for *Landscapes*, spotlighting both the artist Louise Bourgeois and *durée*, accentuates the themes of the novel. What tone does this early emphasis on the idea of *durée* have for the story that follows? Why do you think Penelope is drawn to the artwork of Louise Bourgeois?
2. The artwork of artist J. M. W. Turner plays an important role throughout the novel, and for many of the characters: What major attributes do Turner's famous paintings share? Discuss the main characters in *Landscapes* and why each might have such a strong appreciation for the scenes he depicted, and the manner of their depiction.
3. Juxtapose Turner choosing to depict "**the wreckage of the old fortress, standing defiantly atop the cliffs**" (p. 3) instead of the reconstructed Ehrenbreitstein Fortress, with Julian's redesign of the Library, where he "**insisted on eradicating all traces of the old space in order to build a new one severed from the past.**" (p. 44–45): How are both of these competing ideas central to *Landscapes*?
4. Celia begins plans to paint a portrait of Penelope in the very first chapter, with the painting finally being revealed in the last chapter: In what ways is Penelope's interior mindscape reflected in Celia's visible work during the process of creating the painting? And in the final work?
5. With a portrait artist wanting to portray both their sitter's physical appearance as well as visually capture their spirit, what method does Celia use to try to attain this, of which she concludes: "**The truth of any single thing... requires time and continual return.**" (p. 34)? Discuss how Celia's strategy of creating a painting ties in with the themes of *Landscapes*. Do you think there is always a single "truth" that can be found or revealed?
6. Discuss Penelope's preoccupation with termites throughout the novel. Toward the end of the novel, why do you think Penelope says: "**My fear is that the termites will follow us.**" (p. 209)?

7. An original painting—Turner’s *A View on the Seine*—was the gem of the Mornington Hall collection, and an integral reason for Penelope coming to live on the estate. Penelope had a postcard reproduction of the painting, and eventually an oil reproduction of it was commissioned as well: What questions are raised by the multiple versions of this work of art? Talk about monetary value versus personal value. What happened to the reproduction of *A View on the Seine*? How was the loss of the original different for Penelope than the loss of the reproduction? Why?
8. What are the various ways in which the idea of ownership is investigated in *Landscapes*? What do you believe drives these characters to want to own something? Discuss “Stendhal syndrome,” which Julian gives as an explanation for his actions within a museum (p. 158).
9. *Landscapes* is largely propelled by a single incident that occurred in Penelope’s life over two decades earlier. What happened? In the days that followed, what actions did Penelope take? Explain why you believe she reacted in these specific ways, and what might cause a victim of a traumatic event to make these choices. Is Penelope able to confide in anyone and share what happened to her?
10. **“Perhaps what I need to do is to sink to the very bottom, to get to that day. But how does one get to that place and return, without being destroyed?”** (p. 143) — Discuss Penelope’s situation of wanting to address a past that is still causing her stress in the present, but not wanting to revisit it due to its painful nature. What methods does Penelope try to achieve her goal? Do you believe Penelope ultimately does find peace? If you feel comfortable sharing with your group, discuss whether you have ever been in the same situation as Penelope, and if you found a method of revisiting and addressing your own past.
11. The interludes between chapters are set in italics and focus on a particular work of art or art by particular artists: How do these interludes tie in to the novel as a whole? As you were reading Penelope’s story, what effect did the interludes have on your reading experience? What do we come to find out about them toward the end of the book?
12. As a group, consider all of the various characters in *Landscapes* and who among them are shown journaling. Why do you think keeping a diary, journal, or scrapbook might be helpful to these individuals?
13. Penelope and Julian take turns narrating the chapters of *Landscapes*, set in the present and leading up to their first meeting in over two decades, and in doing so both independently dive into their shared past: Discuss what the two have in common in the aftermath of the end of their relationship. Were you surprised by any of these similarities? Would you say that Julian was equally as changed as Penelope was?
14. How is Julian shown trying to control time? Discuss what you believe is driving him to do this. Why do you think it’s significant that in Julian’s last scene, we see him falling asleep in this manner?
15. *Landscapes* takes place in the future, with the setting being a familiar-looking Europe: Talk about the differences between our current world and this future one. Which elements surprised you? Do you think the unpredictable, rapidly changing landscape that the characters are immersed in had any particular effect on your reading of this novel? Why do you think this setting was appropriate for Penelope’s story?
16. The narrator’s namesake is a character in Homer’s *Odyssey*: Penelope, wife of Odysseus. What do the two Penelopes have in common? In what different ways is Penelope shown waiting in *Landscapes*? Why does Penelope think that **“waiting gives power to the other”** (p. 180)?

17. Throughout the novel, we are presented with snapshots of Penelope's work as an archivist and of the various objects in the estate's collection that she is organizing and cataloging: Why might Penelope be drawn to the task of archiving? What was the effect of having the stand-alone descriptions of some of these objects, in relationship to the novel as a whole?
18. **"...the whole estate was built partly on a demolished village."** (p. 39) — Consider the ways in which *Landscapes* investigate issues of class via architecture. Discuss wealthy families' "country houses," such as Mornington Hall, and the manner in which they were built. What other examples appear in the book, of architecture being inextricably connected to class?
19. **"When I first stood before Poussin's *The Abduction of the Sabine Women*... I was so transfixed by that blue that I nearly overlooked the violent nature of the subject."** (p. 10–11) — Discuss the idea of beauty being able to disguise something that might otherwise be considered unacceptable, such as violence. What additional examples of this appear in *Landscapes*?
20. Three months after Penelope's traumatic attack, she decides to return to the Tate. What propels her to enter this **"place freighted with memories"** (p. 180)? Do you think Penelope is ultimately successful at her goal of reclaiming the spaces—both physical and psychological—that she feels severed from? Why or why not? Discuss whether you believe Julian is equally severed from places as well. If so, where, and why? Is Julian successful at reclaiming these spaces?
21. Upon viewing Turner's *A Disaster at Sea* and *The Rape of Proserpine*, Penelope's has this reaction: **"I felt I was seeing, for the first time, an artist I have always known."** (p. 181) — How does Penelope's interpretation of Turner's paintings change? What, specifically, stands out to Penelope in Turner's depiction of Proserpine being kidnapped? Do you believe any work of art is capable of being viewed objectively, without an individual's personal history tinting their perception?
22. Consider the works of art, spanning hundreds of years, that appear in *Landscapes*: How is female subjugation in male-dominated Western art investigated? What was the effect of also having descriptions of more modern works of art created by women? Do you think artwork always reflects the cultural norms that are in place at the time of its creation? How should art from past eras be treated now in the present day, in cases where they depict something no longer considered acceptable by society at large?
23. **"It is for them that we strive to keep the house intact."** (p. 15) — Discuss why Penelope prefers the term *travelers* over *refugees*, and why she is so dedicated to helping them. What are the different personal experiences Penelope has had that have led to this way of thinking? Consider current-day issues that are resulting in mass movements of people, and as a group, discuss the terminology we currently use to describe these different groups. As the effects of climate change continue to become more obtrusive, do you believe we will change how we refer to people who need to move from their homes?
24. About Alex, Penelope thinks: **"There was something about him—and this is a sense of unease I've felt in the past with certain men—something menacing... I must refrain from judgment."** (p. 72) — Do you think Penelope was correct to suppress her strong intuition and give shelter to Alex? What would you have done in Penelope's shoes?
25. Aidan says, as a way of summarizing his brother Julian's disrespectful actions toward others: **"He destroys things in his path, so nothing can touch him."** (p. 185) — Discuss whether or not you believe that people who abuse others must have suffered some type of abuse or trauma themselves. Discuss Julian specifically, and his supposed epiphany and the revelation of his "backstory" near the end of the book. Share your opinions on the psychology behind his actions.

26. Penelope says, “...loss is unaffected by repetition or experience. Each loss is a fresh cut.” (p. 49) — Discuss the various losses that the characters of *Landscapes* experienced, and how each coped with the experience. Consider the loss of both Penelope’s mother and Julian’s mother.
27. “The girl wonders if the artist who is still sketching will return to this scene, to this moment of repose before the rebuilding begins.” (p. 211) — Revisit the ending pages of the book and discuss the character we are introduced to there, a contemporary of Turner: What effect is created by portraying the famous scene and the famous artist through the gaze of a young woman? As a group, discuss your thoughts about this ending for the novel. Were you surprised by how the story came to a close?
28. Lastly, consider the structure of the novel’s chapters: In the blanks below, categorize them by filling in a brief, consistent description of each chapter’s focus (examples: name of narrator; type of artwork), and then color code the different categories: What pattern emerges? As a group, discuss what effect this structure might have on the experience of reading *Landscapes*:

“Prologue”: _____

“One — September”: _____

Interlude on Giambologna and Cellini: _____

“Two — October”: _____

Interlude on Nicolas Poussin: _____

“Three — 7 April, early afternoon”: _____

Interlude on Titian: _____

“Four — November”: _____

Interlude on Edgar Degas: _____

“Five — December”: _____

Interlude on Ana Mendieta: _____

“Six — 7 April, late afternoon”: _____

Interlude on the Surrealists: _____

“Seven — January”: _____

“Eight — 8 April, morning”: _____

Interlude on Louise Bourgeois: _____

“Nine — February”: _____

Interlude on Kara Walker: _____

“Ten — 9 April, late afternoon”: _____

Interlude on Doris Salcedo: _____

“Eleven — March”: _____