

Discussion Questions: A Celibate Season*

1. What makes a marriage? How does Jock and Chas's relationship fit into your definition? How does their marriage change over the course of their ten-month separation?
2. How important is sex to a marriage? What do you think Jocelyn means when she writes (in a letter that is never sent): "I felt known—that strange biblical term. It really does mean something after all." What has Austin's proximity given her that Chas could not?
3. Discuss both incidents of infidelity. What do you think made each spouse stray? How does Jocelyn's experience with Austin differ from Chas's experience with Davina and Sue? Is one more "guilty" than the other? Is it better that these incidents weren't confessed, or would honesty have been a better policy?
4. Do you think Jock and Chas are good parents? What effect does their separation have on their children?
5. At first, Jock and Charles both agree that letter writing will serve them well because of its economy. Later on, Charles says, "Writing these letters to you all year has had a curious effect on me, letting me know, in fact, what I'm thinking." How do these letters inform the writer as well as the recipient?
6. Consider the characteristics and limitations of the epistolary form. What effect does this genre have on the story and what the reader learns about the characters and plot? What happens to the point of view? What are the effects of two first-person narrators? How might this story be different if told through only one first-person narrator? An omniscient narrator?
7. How do Jock and Chas use their correspondence to express their feelings? How are their feelings better served through written, as opposed to oral, communication? Do you think Jock and Chas's relationship would have changed over the course of their separation if they had only communicated with each other via the telephone? Is it easier to ignore someone's written words, or their spoken ones?
8. What sorts of devices do the authors use to move the plot along and give the story its shape? Some things to consider: use of fax, references to telephone conversations, simultaneous letters, letters not sent, dates, etc.
9. Does Jock and Chas's preoccupation with their own achievements and dilemmas seem selfish to you? Do you think they would have pursued their respective challenges had there been no separation?
10. What will become of Jock and Chas's marriage? Has the "celibate season" made it weaker or stronger? How do you think each has changed over the course of ten months?

*Questions from readinggroupguides.com