

Dietland by Sarai Walker

A Discussion Guide

Introduction

Plum Kettle does her best not to be noticed, because when you're fat, to be noticed is to be judged. Or mocked. Or worse. With her job answering fan mail for a popular teen girls' magazine, she is biding her time until her weight-loss surgery. Only then can her true life as a thin person finally begin.

Then, when a mysterious woman starts following her, Plum finds herself falling down a rabbit hole and into an underground community of women who live life on their own terms. There Plum agrees to a series of challenges that force her to deal with her past, her doubts, and the real costs of becoming "beautiful." At the same time, a dangerous guerrilla group called "Jennifer" begins to terrorize a world that mistreats women, and as Plum grapples with her personal struggles, she becomes entangled in a sinister plot. The consequences are explosive.

Dietland is a bold, original, and funny debut novel that takes on the beauty industry, gender inequality, and our weight loss obsession—from the inside out, and with fists flying.

Questions and Discussion Points

1. Who is the "messenger from another world" (page 4) who seems to be following Plum at the start of the story? Plum says that the girl has come to "wake [her] from [her] sleep" (page 4). What does she mean by this? Would you say that the girl was successful?
2. Plum confesses that when she thinks of her life "*back then*" she "saw [herself] as an outline . . . waiting to be filled in" (page 5). What did she feel was lacking or missing in her life at that time? What does she believe will allow her to feel complete? Is she correct?

3. Plum responds to those who write to the advice column of a teen magazine. What kinds of questions do the girls ask? What do the people who write in seem to have in common? What kind of advice does Plum give them? What does Plum mean when she says that “people could be deleted, switched off” (page 10)? Does she maintain this point of view throughout the entire story? Why or why not?
4. Why does the girl who follows Plum write the word “Dietland” on Plum’s hand? What does Plum initially think this means? What does her response reveal about her character? Is she correct? What is Dietland?
5. When Plum and her mother are living at Aunt Delia’s house, people often stop to take photographs. What does Plum believe they are taking pictures of? What are these people actually taking pictures of? How does this detail tie in with the major themes of the novel?
6. What is Plum’s real name? How did she get her nickname, and what does she see as the difference between the two identities? How does this change over the course of the story? What other characters could be said to have—or have had—more than one identity? What does this indicate about identity and womanhood?
7. How does Plum’s mother respond to her daughter’s weight-loss efforts? Why do you think that she responds in this way? Do you agree with her reaction? What kinds of things does Plum try in her attempts to lose weight? Are any of the methods successful? What does Plum mean when she says that she was a Baptist?

8. What is Calliope House? Who runs it? Who lives there, and why do they live there? How did the house get its name? How does the history of the house tie in with the major themes of the novel? What purpose does the house ultimately seem to serve?
9. Who is dropped out of the plane? Who are the Dirty Dozen? What do the people who are murdered have in common? What would you say is the link among all of them? Are their murders shocking? Why or why not?
10. What is the New Baptist Plan? What steps does it include? How does it differ from the other plans she has tried? What results does the plan seem to have? Would you say that it is successful for Plum? Why or why not?
11. How does Marlowe meet or defy Plum's initial expectations of what she will be like? What does Marlowe say was the best day of her life and why? What does Marlowe mean when she says that "Being a woman means being a faker" (page 145)? Do you agree with her point of view? Explain.
12. Why does Plum go underground at Calliope House? What does this entail? How does the experience ultimately affect Plum? Is she different after her reemergence? If so, how has she changed?
13. What does Plum identify as the major benefit of being fat? What is she able to do as a result of her weight that slimmer women cannot? How does this help her?

14. Why does Plum avoid using the word “fat” early in the novel (pages 88 and 105)? Is it significant that she starts using it proudly later on (pages 196–7)? Why is reclaiming this word important in Plum’s transformation?
15. How is Jennifer portrayed in the media, and how do people respond to these reports? What is the “Jennifer effect”? What role does the media seem to play in the way that Jennifer is portrayed and understood? Plum says that people “talked about what was happening as if it were a Western” (page 212). What does she mean by this? How does this tie in with the way that we relate to the media today?
16. How does Sana’s relationship to other young women influence or change Plum’s relationship to the young women who write to her for advice? What common trauma does Plum ultimately realize all of the women share? How is this trauma defined? Is there a way for this trauma to be avoided?
17. Who is Jennifer? Is Jennifer a single person or a group of people? What is Soledad’s relationship to Jennifer? Do you believe that Soledad’s actions and the actions of Jennifer are justifiable in some way? Discuss. What motivates the actions that Jennifer is responsible for?
18. What kinds of confrontations does Plum face as she undergoes her transformation? Who initiates these confrontations, and what causes them? How does Plum handle each one? Are these confrontations surprising? Could they have been avoided? If so, how?

19. Does Plum ultimately go through with the weight-loss surgery? Why or why not? Do you think that she made the right decision? Does she ultimately succeed in transforming herself in the way that she had hoped?
20. Why does Verena say that “Virginia Woolf once wrote that it’s more difficult to kill a phantom than a reality” (page 292)? What do you think she means by this? Do you agree?

About the Author

Sarai Walker is a writer, critic, and teacher. She has an MFA in creative writing and literature from Bennington College and a PhD in English from the University of London. Walker was a writer and editor for the 2005 edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. Her articles have appeared in *Seventeen*, *Mademoiselle*, *Glamour*, and other venues. *Dietland* is her first novel.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi: *We Should All Be Feminists* or *Americanah*

Atwood, Margaret: *The Blind Assassin*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, or *The Edible Woman*

Bryant, Dorothy: *Ella Price’s Journal*

Chopin, Kate: *The Awakening*

DeLillo, Don: *White Noise*

Grealy, Lucy: *Autobiography of a Face*

Knapp, Caroline: *Appetites: Why Women Want*

Koppelman, Susan: *The Strange History of Suzanne LaFleshe: And Other Stories of Women and Fatness*

Kushner, Rachel: *The Flamethrowers*

Levy, Ariel: *Female Chauvinist Pigs*

Morrison, Toni: *The Bluest Eye*

Nothomb, Amélie: *The Life of Hunger*

Palahniuk, Chuck: *Fight Club*

Plath, Sylvia: *The Bell Jar*

Shafak, Elif: *The Gaze*

Tovar, Virgie: *Hot and Heavy: Fierce Fat Girls on Life, Love & Fashion*

Walker, Alice: *The Color Purple* or *Possessing the Secret of Joy*

Winterson, Jeanette: *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

Zahavi, Helen: *Dirty Weekend*

Fun Extras

[Marlowe's Book](#)

[Daisy Chain Magazine](#)

Praise

“Plum Kettle, a ghostwriter for a popular teen mag, is lured into a subversive sisterhood in this riotous first novel. Finally, the feminist murder mystery/makeover story we’ve been waiting for.”
—**O, The Oprah Magazine**

“Read *Dietland*...not only because it's smart and timely...but because it's heartbreaking and tragic and very very comic (as long as you like your laughs dark) and because it will guarantee that you never look at a lipstick or a pair of stilettos or a bathroom scale the same way again. Sarai Walker is some kind of twisted sister. And of course I mean that as the highest possible compliment.” —
Sara Nelson

“Sarai Walker’s debut novel does something few contemporary writers — whether green or seasoned — have managed to do well: *Dietland* is a searing feminist manifesto, a hardcore, politically-charged criticism of the unavoidable ills that plague women today.” —**Bustle**

“Witty and wise.” —**People**

“A thrilling, incendiary manifesto disguised as a beach read...It's a giddy revenge fantasy that will shake up your thinking and burrow under your skin, no matter its size.” —**Entertainment Weekly**

“*Fight Club* meets fat acceptance — with a militant feminist manifesto, revenge and societal change thrown in for good measure.” —**Fort Worth Star-Telegram**

"Sarai Walker's audacious, hilarious-yet surprisingly touching-novel begins by spoofing the

weight loss industry and moves on to a devastating fantasy in which an avenger known as "Jennifer" targets men who prey on women. Through it all marches Plum, a fat woman who learns to love herself as she is, and whom I loved at all stages of her education. Keenly intelligent, daring, and original, *Dietland* has something important to say to us all.”— **Alice Mattison, author of *When We Argued All Night* and *The Book Borrower***

"Sarai Walker has written a call to arms. Devious, subversive, delightful, DIETLAND is a Scum Manifesto set to a pop music beat and Plum Kettle is a feminist hero for the modern age.”— **Alice Sebold, author of *The Lovely Bones***

“The first rule of *Dietland* is you should definitely talk about *Dietland*. And I suspect you’ll want to. Gather your book clubs, gather all the Jennifers you know! At first you’ll think you’re reading a familiar story: a woman who works at a women’s magazine tries to lose weight. And then POW! *Dietland* lithely moves in ways and to places you won’t expect. Sarai Walker has a wonderfully curious mind, and this is an impressive, ambitious first novel.”— **Gabrielle Zevin, author of *The Storied Life of AJ Fikry***

“*Dietland* is a book I have been waiting for someone to write all my life, and it hit me hard right where I live, right where so many of us have wasted too much time living. It's courageous, compassionate, intelligent, pissed off and much more fun than it has any right to be. I can think of twenty people I want to buy it for, without even trying.” — **Pam Houston, author of *Contents May Have Shifted***