

Discussion Questions

1. Trust is a recurring theme in Lisa Grunwald's novel. Which characters are most deeply affected by its presence or absence? What makes us trust another person, and what happens if that trust is betrayed? Can a relationship recover after trust has been broken?
2. For Martha Gaines, "there was no future for her without Henry. There was only her tiny world, bordered by practice walls and practice floors." (p. 113) Why does Martha become so attached to Henry, and how would you describe their relationship?
3. Is it possible to love a person too much? Have you ever felt smothered by love? Is there a secret to building a relationship where both people feel equally loved?
4. According to Martha, "a child was something to manage, not to be managed by." (p. 44). Do you agree with her ideas on raising children? Describe and compare the different child-rearing approaches that are explored in this story. Are they all outdated now, or do any of them still hold weight?
5. How does Henry's early experience—being tended by a number of devoted practice mothers—affect his personality as he grows up? What is the downside to his unusual upbringing? What are the benefits?
6. As a child, Henry covers the walls of his closet with his own drawings, so that the closet becomes "a place of deep colors, vast distances, and great possibilities." (p. 141) How is Henry's life shaped by his artistic gifts? In what ways do these gifts fall short? How are these shortcomings reflected in his relationships with women?
7. "Henry's silence gave him a refuge, an excuse not to participate, but it was also a weapon for keeping Martha at bay." (p. 145) What brings on Henry's silent period and what pulls him out of it? Why is silence such a powerful weapon? What other psychological weapons do we use against those closest to us?
8. Why is Henry drawn to Charles and Karen at the Humphrey School, and why is the couple's home so important to him? How does their marriage compare with other romantic relationships depicted in *The Irresistible Henry House*?
9. At Martha's funeral service, what does Henry discover as he describes her accomplishments? Do you think his epiphany is a momentary vision or a permanent change of heart? Is there anything truly redeeming about Martha?
10. What makes Henry choose Peace Jacobs, after so many girls and women have pursued him in vain?

11. Discuss the lifelong relationship between Henry and Mary Jane. How does Henry's blinding of Mary Jane affect their friendship? What makes their connection to each other unique?
12. What does Grunwald's portrayal of the lives and career options of women like Martha, Betty, and Ethel say about the opportunities for women in the mid-twentieth century? How much has changed since then?
13. As the author depicts Henry's journey from practice baby to grown man, vivid historical details are revealed. When you look back at the various locations and decades that are depicted in *The Irresistible Henry House*, which scenes strike you as the most memorable, and why?
14. Over the course of the novel, Henry uses, betrays, and lies to nearly all the women who trust him. Do you consider Henry a likeable character despite this? To what extent can we blame his behavior on his upbringing? Is there a point at which we must take responsibility for our own actions?
15. Henry never meets his father or discovers his identity. Discuss the effects of this absence on Henry's relationships with other men. What characters act as father figures for Henry?
16. Near the end of the book, Henry expresses gratitude toward Betty for choosing to go through with her pregnancy and giving him life. Beyond this initial gift, has Betty given anything to Henry as a mother? Has Henry inherited any of her characteristics?
17. Henry longs to find lasting love and a home of his own, but he finds himself chronically incapable of trust. Do you think there is hope for Henry? Can we ever truly transcend the effects of our upbringing?
18. What do you think will happen after the novel ends? Will Henry get to live in the home that he and Haley are drawing?
(Questions issued by publisher.)