

Discussion Questions

1. Julia Glass is also a painter. How do the style, structure, and description of **Three Junes** reflect her artistic sensibility? How do the various segments, stories, and flashbacks interspersed within the chronological text work together?

2. Marjorie, while traveling in Greece, says she cannot stop "collecting worlds . . . different views, each representing a new window" (p. 31). How is the role of the traveler and observer like the role of the author?

3. Place figures crucially in the novel, whether it is a Greek island, a Scottish town, the West Village of New York City, or a Long Island town. What is the importance of each place and its role in the context of the entire novel? What are the symbolic differences between the countryside and the city? Where does Fenno belong?

4. The episodes in the first part, Paul's vacation in Greece juxtaposed against the tale of his life in Scotland, come together to form a picture of his marriage with Maureen. Why does the author tell his tale in this fashion? Why is this part titled "Collies"?

5. Why does Paul, the steady shepherd of his family and newspaper, go to Greece first on vacation and then to live? Do you think he really wanted to "drop [his memories] like stones, one by one, in the sea" (p. 49)?

6. In the beginning, Fern reminds Paul of Maureen. Are the two alike or not? What are their similarities and differences? What does each want from life? How have Fern's relationships affected her character and choices? Why hasn't she told Stavros about her pregnancy? What is she afraid of?

7. Why doesn't Fenno visit his father in Greece? What else has Fenno postponed doing or compromised for the sake of work or being "upright"? What is Fenno consumed by? Where does the "coolness" between Fenno and his brother David stem from? Is it rivalry? Do you think this changes by the end? Which brother seems more admirable, and why?

8. What does the author accomplish by dividing the book into three parts with only the second as a first-person narrative? Why does she let Fenno tell his own story? What effect does this have on the reader? In addition, why does Fenno occasionally address the reader--for instance, when he says, "feeling left out, you will have noticed, is second nature to me" (p. 125)? Does this make us sympathetic to Fenno?

9. Part two is titled "Upright." Why? Is uprightness a positive or negative characteristic? Which characters are upright in the novel? Who is not?

10. What is the appeal of birds for Fenno and Mal? Fascinated by birds as an adolescent, Fenno covers the walls of his bookstore, named Plume, with bird prints. The dishes Mal breaks also have birds on them. Felicity--Mal's and then Fenno's bird--is a vital character in the novel. Do birds and books have a special connection here?

11. What is the role of the mother in **Three Junes**? Has motherhood transformed or hindered Maureen? Do you think it will change Fern? How does Lucinda, the ubermother, carry out her role? How about Veronique?

12. The novel teems with interconnected relationships. Describe some of them. Paul and Maureen--were both satisfied in life; in marriage? Mal and Fenno--was their relationship ever fully actualized? Fenno and Tony--what kind of attraction did they share? Was it purely sexual? Tony and Fern--what brought them together? Fern and Stavros--will they stay together? Which is your favorite couple?

13. Tony's job is "to take the very, very small and make it large. . . . Give stature to the details" (p. 277), which is also what the author does. Is Tony a compelling character in **Three Junes**? Is he simply a foil to Fenno and Fern? What is his purpose in the novel?

14. How does food weave its way into all three parts--smells, textures, tastes? Why does the author vividly spell out the menus and recipes for us at all the critical meals? Can you remember any of the dishes?

15. What are the various views of death presented in **Three Junes**? How does the author view death? How do the characters in the novel accept or come to terms with death?

16. Anna explains to Fern, "When it comes to life, we spin our own yarn, and where we end up is really, in fact, where we always intended to be" (p. 286). Glass ends her novel echoing this quote. Why? What do Anna's words signify?



Julia Glass

1956-

Birth: 1956 in Massachusetts, United States

Nationality: American

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"Sidelights"

Julia Glass is both an artist and a writer. After graduating from Yale University, the art major was awarded a fellowship to study in France, and upon her return to the States, Glass worked at Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum in her native Massachusetts. In 1980, she moved to New York City, where she worked as a copy editor and continued her painting. Glass had always loved to write, and she found herself spending more and more time creating short stories.

Glass's novella *Souvenirs*, loosely based on her visit to Greece during 1979, the year of the fellowship, was never published, but Glass rewrote it, renamed it "Collies," and used it for the first part of *Three Junes*, a three-part novel that takes place during the Junes of 1989, 1995, and 1999. *Denver Post* contributor John Freeman noted that, although Glass uses more than one narrator, her prose "remains supple and light throughout, full of delicate little ellipses that evoke the fullness, the strangeness of consciousness. When it comes to scenery, too, Glass takes nothing for granted." Freeman added: "Glass goes out of her way to capture the texture of light, the scent of breezes." Glass took a character from *Souvenirs*, fashioned after an older man she had met, and created Paul McLeod, a newspaper publisher and head of a family from Dumfries, an area of Scotland Glass had visited as a teen. As the story begins in 1989, Paul's wife, Maureen, who raises Collies, dies of lung cancer, and Paul retreats to Greece, where he meets and is consoled by Fern, a young artist who reappears in the third section.

Glass told Claudia La Rocco in an interview for the *Arizona Republic* that before she began the novel, she had been working on another when she was told she had breast cancer. She also lost a younger sister to suicide. She put away the unfinished novel, and her grief and despair were absorbed into the character of Paul. Glass told La Rocco: "I came to feel that what I wanted to write, in essence, was a book about living beyond incurable heartbreak and irreparable loss."

The "Upright" section begins six years later, in 1995. Paul has died, and his eldest son, Fenno, and twin sons, David and Dennis, and their wives, are in Scotland arranging the funeral. Fenno has come from New York, where he studied literature and stayed to open a book shop with an inheritance from a deceased grandfather under the tutelage of a generous gay mentor, Ralph Quayle. Fenno's relationship with his father had been troubled. While Paul had hoped Fenno would take over the newspaper business, the shy and mannerly Scot was happiest living in the West Village, where he blended into gay society,

but seldom participated. There he meets witty *New York Times* music critic Malachy, or Mal, Burns, who, because he is dying of AIDS, asks Fenno to care for his pet parrot, Felicity. Soon the bird becomes a fixture in Fenno's bookstore, Plume.

New York Times Book Review contributor Katherine Wolff called Mal "a marvelously drawn character." Wolff added: "The dying critic displays a delicious blend of blasphemy and wit." Fenno has a lover named Tony, and when their relationship ends, they remain friends. The final section, titled "Boys," finds Fenno and his brother, David, becoming closer. He and Fern meet at Ralph's Fire Island summer home, but they never learn of their connection.

BookPage reviewer and interviewer Alden Mudge wrote that Glass "thinks of her novel as triptych rather than a trilogy, similar in form to 'the altar pieces that I loved so much when I was studying art. You'd have a momentous central religious image and, to either side, images of the patrons who paid for the altar piece facing in toward this rich, very complicated, colorful central image.'"

Wolff also noted that "masterfully, *Three Junes* shows how love follows a circuitous path, how its messengers come to wear disguises. Julia Glass has written a generous book about family expectations—but also about happiness, luck, and, as she puts it, the 'grandiosity of genes.'" *Los Angeles Times Book Review* contributor Mark Rozzo wrote that the novel "goes after the big issues without a trace of fustiness and gives us a memorable hero." Writing in the *Lambda Book Report*, Walter Wadas commented that *Three Junes* "is a subtly textured, emotionally rich tale, written in language equally affecting. Julia Glass has in Fenno McLeod created a major character, a gay male protagonist, with a complete melodrama of a life. And that's very satisfying to read."

In her second book, *The Whole World Over: A Novel*, Glass writes of Greenie Duquette, whose skill at pastry making lands her a job as the personal chef to the governor of New Mexico. As a result, Greenie leaves behind her therapist husband, Alan, in Manhattan and goes off to New Mexico with their son. The story also follows Greenie's friend, restaurant owner Mathew, who is infatuated with lawyer Gordie. Meanwhile Gordie's partner, Stephen, wants a child. As for Alan, whose practice is fading, he begins treating Saga, a memory-loss patient who no longer feels she has a purpose in life. Various other lives intersect in the story, including Fenno from *Three Junes*.

Once again, reviewers praised Glass's effort. "Glass knows what she's doing," wrote a *Kirkus Reviews* contributor of *The Whole World Over*. "Readers who love quirky characters and a gentle wit that breathes affection even as it skewers human foolishness and frailty will follow her anywhere." Bette-Lee Fox, writing in the *Library Journal*, noted that the author's "always captivating tale is a quilt of many colors and motivations." Several reviewers also commented on Glass's ability to capture family life. Noting that the author "finds inspiration in the vicissitudes of family strife," Elizabeth Judd wrote in the *Atlantic* that "watching Glass sort out a dozen intersecting story lines is never less than fascinating."

PERSONAL INFORMATION

Born 1956, in MA; children: two sons. **Education:** Graduate of Yale University. **Avocational Interests:** Designing and hooking rugs. **Addresses:** Home: Marblehead, MA.

AWARDS

Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society Medal, 1999, for *Collies* (first part of *Three Junes*); New York Foundation for the Arts fellow, 2000; National Book Award, 2002, for *Three Junes*; three Nelson Algren Awards and the Tobias Wolff Award; Radcliffe Institute fellow, 2004- 05.

CAREER

Writer, journalist, editor, artist, and designer. Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, member of staff; *Cosmopolitan*, New York, NY, copy editor. *Exhibitions:* Art exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and the National Academy of Design.

WRITINGS:

- *Three Junes*, Pantheon Books (New York, NY), 2002.
- *The Whole World Over: A Novel*, Pantheon Books (New York, NY), 2006.

Contributor to periodicals, including the *Bellingham Review* and *Chicago Tribune*.

Interview

A Conversation with Julia Glass, author of *Three Junes*

What led you to create *Three Junes*?

Sometimes it's hard for me to think of this novel as something I *created*, because I never sat down and planned it out as a whole, the way you might cut and piece together a suit from a bolt of cloth (as I'd always imagined a novel gets written). *Three Junes* grew over several years, like a tree--organically and at first in odd, sporadic bursts--starting out as a short story called "Souvenirs," which was based on an experience I had while traveling in Greece after college. One of the first stories I wrote as an adult, it was your typical ingenue-abroad, loss-of-innocence tale with a predictably idyllic setting, and I was hoping to sell it to *Cosmopolitan* magazine, where I was working as a copy editor. (In those days, short stories--some by wonderful writers like Laurie Colwin, Lorrie Moore, and Elinor Lipman--were a fixture of the magazine. Often, there were two in a single issue, just as there once were in the *New Yorker*.) Reportedly, Helen Gurley Brown read my story but thought the heroine too "privileged" for her readers--that is, not your good old "mouseburger" COSMO Girl--so into a drawer it went. A few years later, I looked at the story again and decided that Paul, who had been little more than a third wheel or a foil, was much more interesting than Fern or Jack, and I decided to make the story *his*, not Fern's. Suddenly, this character's whole world seemed to crack open before my eyes--his dead wife, his waylaid ambitions, his country home, his sons--and I found myself with an ungainly narrative of 40 pages plus. I actually had the nerve to submit it to a couple of magazines and received a brief but kind rejection from the *Atlantic* the gist of which was "Sorry, though we'd love to see these characters inhabit a novel." Once again, into a drawer it went.

Somehow, though, what was now called "Collies" refused to be abandoned, and a couple years later, two things happened: First, I was intrigued by a fiction competition that included a category for "best novella" and decided to amplify the story yet further. Second, having by now published a couple of stories in modest venues, I'd been contacted by two agents who wondered if I had a novel. Somewhat stubbornly, I was writing only stories--you couldn't really call them "short," since they were lengthy and complex, bursting at the seams like pregnant women refusing to buy maternity clothes--and when I wrote to a fellow writer how unfair it felt that these agents wouldn't consider story collections, he wrote back something like "Stop complaining, get off your duff, and just write a novel. If you want to, you can." I was momentarily hurt, but I knew he was right. Sometimes I wonder if I would ever have written *Three Junes* without that kick in the pants.

Three Junes, teeming with its relationships and interconnected lives, resembles a wonderfully dense nineteenth-century novel in a way, despite its very modern characters and setting. Do you agree?

I am anything but a minimalist, and I don't say this proudly, because if my work--visual as well as verbal--has one prominent weakness, it's a tendency toward clutter. (I also have a tendency to talk too much and, I'm told by the one adult who lives with me, to fill a room with too many objects and too much pattern.) When it works, however--when it's disciplined--the clutter can yield a magnificent richness, and that's what I aspire to. If this makes me a Victorian of sorts, so be it.

I wouldn't flatter *Three Junes* by comparing it with anything by Hardy or Eliot or Hawthorne, but they are all personal gods, so clearly I have such ambitions. In the years after college, when I had ample time to read whatever I wanted, I undertook to fill some of my literary gaps by going on reading binges of certain authors: E.M. Forster, Jane Austen, and George Eliot among them. One book I read then that impressed me above and beyond most of what I'd ever read--and it may have been partially responsible for my starting to write fiction--was *Daniel Deronda*. While I understand the criticism of its flaws, I was astonished by its characters and structure (not to mention its exquisite, masterly prose). Just the idea that you do not meet one of the two protagonists for over a hundred pages seemed revolutionary, and though I didn't write *Three Junes* till many years later, I know that its ultimate structure was in some ways influenced by that impression. I'm not sure I could have risked what I did with Fenno's character--making him the center of the novel yet keeping him largely offstage for most of the beginning and much of the end--without that example.

Why did you divide the book into three parts with only the second as a first-person narrative? Why did you choose Fenno to set apart? In addition, why does Fenno occasionally address the reader, "Feeling left out, you will have noticed, is second nature to me" (p. 172)?

I mentioned earlier how essential character is to me in the creation of story; well, Fenno is a character who basically hijacked my soul as a writer. He's the one who chose *me*. Working on *Three Junes*, I had an experience I'd never had before. In the past, my characters were largely composed in a deliberate manner--under my thumb, you might say--although they often seemed to make spontaneous choices that would surprise me. But Fenno (also Mal, and to some extent Paul) seemed to spring up from my psyche fully formed, like the goddess Athena from her father's head. Writing in Fenno's voice often felt like conversing with a stowaway, continuing the journey and letting go of anxieties about where in the world he *came* from.

One of the timeworn dictums laid down for first novelists is "Whatever you do, steer clear of the first person!" "Collies" had always felt completely natural in the third person, even though it was limited to Paul's point of view, but when I started the second part of the novel, Fenno's story, I couldn't help hearing it in his own voice--and I was petrified. I knew I was embarking on the longest portion of the book and I thought, I can't do this! Change time period, locale, point of view, *and* voice? Surely a big mistake. So I did try to work on the story in third person, and I lasted only a few pages. It felt like trying to bend steel pipe.

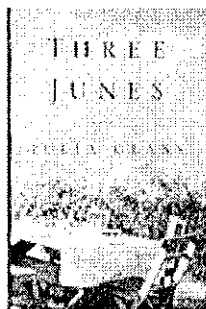
While writing "Boys," the third part, it hit me that what I was writing, structurally, was a triptych--that is, a strong central image flanked by two narrower, more modest images. I thought of the medieval Netherlandish altarpieces I love so much: Sometimes the central panel--be it a picture of the annunciation, the crucifixion, or a martyrdom--is flanked by panels depicting portraits of the altarpiece donors (often husband and wife, male and female). While the central image is frontal, the donors are often shown in profile. And suddenly I had this very clear picture of *Three Junes*. Here was Fenno's large, rich story at the center, told directly to the reader, with Paul and Fern portrayed in intimate detail to left and right but seen *from the side* and that's what third person is: a kind of narrative profile view. From then on, Fern's story flowed easily in the third person, mirroring Paul's.

Places figure crucially in the novel--for instance, a Greek island, a Scottish village, Greenwich Village, and a Long Island town. Are these places significant?

Certainly, all these places are places to which I've traveled (Paros and Dumfries, for example) or know intimately, as I do the Greenwich Village, my neighborhood for the past ten years. But beyond that, virtually all the locales of *Three Junes*, even Fern's hometown, which figures only fleetingly, share an ideal quality. They are places popular with tourists or people escaping their everyday life. I made that choice intentionally, though it entailed certain risks, the first, quite simply, that places of such celebrity may upstage characters and events; the second, that they will make the story seem superficial or glib, like the escapist fiction you buy at the airport to distract yourself from the boredom and anxiety of flying. What I wanted, however, was to make place underscore the deep, nearly insatiable longing felt by the three major characters. Almost all these places are, in real life, places where we hope to receive some kind of sublime, intangible gift, be it beauty or peace or romance, and we often (though not always) come away unsatisfied. Greece, for instance--as the characters themselves acknowledge--is a place utterly steeped in the past. We go there as tourists to wander through ruins and marvel at the eeriness of time and mortality; perhaps we want the Oracle to make sense of our human lives. When he goes to

Greece, Paul is torn between wanting to remain in his perfectly ordered past and to somehow get free of its grasp. He does receive a gift, but it's not the one he expected. Scotland, as I mentioned before, brings to mind tradition and family loyalty (think of the clans and the tartans), but by the same token it is a place where acts of great barbarity and betrayal took place, where the land has been as tough and unyielding as it is beautiful. That, of course, is the duplicitous landscape of family itself: love and betrayal, war and peace. Paris, of course, represents true, everlasting love, while Amagansett is a place where we imagine people living perfect lives in perfect privacy.... And then there's June, the perfect month: the month of blossoming, of weddings and conceptions, of--since our childhood--being freed from obligations.

By Julia Glass



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A new canvas for Julia Glass
The figurative painter turns her guilty pleasure into a rich debut novel

Interview by Alden Mudge

Among the many pleasures of Julia Glass' marvelous first novel, **Three Junes**, are the numerous small, brilliantly rendered moments the gestures, objects and places that suggest the larger dramas in the lives of the McLeod family. Such casual-seeming moments often have a painterly luminescence, which should surprise no one. Before she became a writer, Julia Glass was an accomplished figurative painter.



"Like the character Fern, I actually did have a fellowship to paint in Paris after I graduated from Yale," Glass says during a recent call to her home in New York's West Village. "I had always been a good writer, but I was concentrating on the visual arts. After college and after Paris, I came to New York like lots of young aspiring artists. I showed paintings in group shows and won some modest prizes. I supported myself as a copy editor for a magazine. Gradually I realized that I missed writing and I began to write stories. The funny thing is, I'd feel incredibly guilty about this. I'd come home from my copy-editing job and instead of working on some big painting, I'd feel drawn to working on a short story. It was as if I had some secret vice. Finally I decided, this is my life. I can do this if I want."

One of the first stories Glass wrote was "Souvenirs," which was loosely based on experiences she had on vacation in Greece in 1979 during her fellowship year. "It was a very formulaic, ingenue-abroad, loss-of-innocence story," she now says. It was never published.

Revisiting the story some years later, a "splinter of memory" of a "very sad-looking, very handsome older Englishman in his 60s" presented itself. "I had had only one brief conversation with him in which he explained that his wife had recently died. When I went back to the story, I thought this man is the really interesting character here." Since she knew almost nothing about England but did know something about Scotland (she'd vacationed with distant cousins in Dumfries during her teens), Glass made the story's central character, Paul McLeod, a Scottish newspaper publisher. The heroine of the original story morphed into Fern, a young artist who briefly tantalizes the grieving McLeod in Greece (and reappears in full in the final section of the novel). "Souvenirs" became "Collies," winner of the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Society medal for best novella, and, eventually, the opening section of **Three Junes**.

Told in three parts, each set in the month of June, each a variegated weave of past and present, the novel movingly explores love and loss and the emotional bonds among the McLeods Paul and Maureen, oldest son Fenno, twin sons David and Dennis, and a surprisingly large constellation of people connected to them.

"It's a novel about many things," Glass says. "Relationships between adult siblings fascinate me. . . . I wanted there to be a reflection of the truism that every child in a given family has a different childhood. But I also really wanted it to be about how we live not heartbreak, heartbreak that

David and Dennis, and a surprisingly large constellation of people connected to them.

"It's a novel about many things," Glass says. "Relationships between adult siblings fascinate me. . . . I wanted there to be a reflection of the truism that every child in a given family has a different childhood. But I also really wanted it to be about how we live past heartbreak, heartbreak that we're never going to get over, heartbreak that will be stratified in our hearts forever. For each of these characters there is a loss that is in a way irredeemable, but also one that he or she can get through and live beyond in a full way."

Central to this overarching story of heartbreak and its aftermath is the narrative of Fenno McLeod, an articulate, emotionally reserved gay man who goes to New York to study literature and stays to open a bookstore in the West Village. Fenno forms an extraordinary friendship with a witty, acerbic music critic named Malachy Burns who is dying of AIDS.

"Fenno was the kind of character I'd read about but had never experienced before, where a character gets up and starts to live his or her life pretty autonomously, while you're madly trying to keep up," Glass says. "I'd walk my at-that-time one-year-old along Bank Street to his babysitter, and I'd have this experience where I just sort of saw Fenno's life in this part of New York. Then on these walks back and forth with my baby in the stroller, I began to hear his voice, and I started to write part two of the book." Glass also remained interested in the character of Fern, and she eventually began writing a third section to the novel. "Not having gone to school in fiction-writing, I probably broke a lot of rules without even knowing it," she says. "I never took a creative writing class, and I actually took very few literature classes, considering how much I love reading. I've been a bookworm since the minute I could read. But I love to savor books, read them very slowly. It drove me nuts that you have to take these courses where you read the great books in a week. I can't read that way."

Glass thinks of her novel as triptych rather than a trilogy, similar in form to "the altar pieces that I loved so much when I was studying art. You'd have a momentous central religious image and, to either side, images of the patrons who paid for the altar piece facing in toward this rich, very complicated, colorful central image. . . . I think of this as being Fenno's story flanked by the stories of these two other characters' stories seen in profile."

Of the novel's final section, in which Fern connects with Fenno, and Fenno revises his relationship with his brother Dennis, Glass says, "Early on while I was working on **Three Junes** I had a series of personal crises in my own life that could have paralyzed me. I reached a point where I realized that time doesn't heal all wounds, that there are tragedies that we carry around forever. But I am essentially a hopeful person. I didn't want it to seem glib or pasted on, but I did want this book to have a happy ending, and in my mind it does."