

Discussion Questions

From the author’s website

1. “Hayden used to be obsessed with orphans,” Miles remembers in Chapter 16, and it seems that *Await Your Reply* is full of characters who have lost one or both parents. Why is the loss of a parent—being an orphan—of such interest to Hayden? How does it fit in with the themes of the book?
2. Ch 16 Lydia Barrie “reinvent themselves speech.” Is identity truly more fluid than it used to be? If so, why? What makes up a person’s identity? What holds us to a single sense of self?
3. Is Miles’ loyalty to Hayden an admirable trait? How do issues of loyalty and betrayal play out in the stories of the various main characters?

Additional Questions from the publisher

1. The structure of this novel is unconventional and complex, and each storyline echoes, intertwines, and plays off the others. How did the novel’s non-linear and fragmentary nature affect your understanding of the plot? How does the complicated, pixelated nature of the novel reflect the themes of identity in the novel?
2. Before they go looking for Hayden and Rachel, Lydia Barrie says to Miles, “What kind of person decides that they can throw everything away and—reinvent themselves? As if you could discard the parts of your life that you didn’t want anymore” (197). What do you think is the appeal of reinvention for Ryan, Lucy, and Hayden? What motivates each character to shed their original selves? Do you think it’s possible for people to “discard” unwanted aspects of themselves?
3. The novel continually circles around the notion of a soul, from Lucy’s assuming that George Orson has one, “though she didn’t know the soul’s real name” (223), to the Vladimir Nabokov epigraph at the beginning of part two: “...the soul is but a manner of being...any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations” (93). What do you make of these two conflicting ideas? In the world of the novel, where identities are constantly shifting and dissolving, do souls remain unscathed and whole? Why do we rely on this concept of “the soul”? How does it allow us to understand ourselves and others around us?
4. During Ryan’s tenure with Jay, he muses on how the identities he inhabits are like “shells...hollow skins that you stepped into and that began to solidify over time...They began to take on a life of their own, developed substance” (103). How do we see this come true in the novel? What makes the characters in the novel real or unreal? Is it true that “You could be anyone” (297), as Ryan later tells himself?
5. In chapter 10, the narrative addresses the reader: “...you are aware of your life as a continuous thread, a dependable unfolding story that you tell yourself...You are still you, after all, through all of these hours and days; you are still whole” (88-89). Is this how you conceive of yourself? Has this book affected how you perceive yourself and your identity? How did you interpret this second-person chapter?

“Await Your Reply” by Dan Chaon

6. While Miles never changes his identity, he does attempt to reinvent himself to some degree when he moves back to Cleveland. Why do you think Miles is unable to continue with this new, stable life? What propels his obsession with Hayden? Do you think at the end of the novel Miles is truly finished with his journey—has he accepted the “ending” (289) Hayden has offered him?

7. Do you think anyone in the novel is able to connect with another person? Is there a real connection between Lucy and George Orson, for instance, despite the unreality of his identity? What about between Hayden and Miles? Ryan and Jay? Is authenticity and honesty a requirement for human intimacy?

8. Dan Chaon once said, “I have always thought of myself as a kind of ghost-story/horror writer, though most of the time the supernatural never actually appears on stage.” Does this ring true for *Await Your Reply*? The novel is billed as literary fiction with the suspense of a thriller, and echoes of horror and gothic fiction. Where did you notice this playfulness with genre? Did it remind you of anything you’ve read in the past?

9. *Eadem mutata resurgo*: “Although changed, I shall arise the same. This is the Latin phrase that Hayden includes in his memorial at Banks Island, and which he reflects on in the last chapter. What do you think this phrase ultimately says about Hayden and his actions?

10. At what point were you able to put these storylines together, to understand what had happened? How did your understanding of the events shift as you read further? Did you believe something early on that did or didn’t come to fruition?