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## Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

### **The Friend** by Sigrid Nunez

#### Summary

A moving story of love, friendship, grief, healing, and the magical bond between a woman and her dog.

When a woman unexpectedly loses her lifelong best friend and mentor, she finds herself burdened with the unwanted dog he has left behind.

Her own battle against grief is intensified by the mute suffering of the dog, a huge Great Dane traumatized by the inexplicable disappearance of its master, and by the threat of eviction: dogs are prohibited in her apartment building.

While others worry that grief has made her a victim of magical thinking, the woman refuses to be separated from the dog except for brief periods of time. Isolated from the rest of the world, increasingly obsessed with the dog's care, determined to read its mind and fathom its heart, she comes dangerously close to unraveling. But while troubles abound, rich and surprising rewards lie in store for both of them.

Elegiac and searching, *The Friend* is both a meditation on loss and a celebration of human-canine devotion. (from the publisher)

#### Discussion Questions

1. How is the narrator's love for her friend different from that of a wife, of which he'd had three? For years till his death, even after early affair as student/teacher, the narrator considered him her dearest friend. Why?
2. Talk about the ways in which Apollo provides comfort to the narrator. Consider, for instance, how she describes the fact that "having a huge warm body pressed along the length of your spine is an amazing comfort." What experience with dogs (and cats) have you had in terms of their uncanny ability to recognize our moods and, consciously or not, offer solace?
3. Follow-up to Question 2: How does the narrator comfort Apollo (above and beyond providing food and shelter)?

4. What do you think of the friend, a womanizer who slept with his students, including herself? Were his actions ethical, especially if there is equal attraction? He once said, that "the classroom was the most erotic place in the world. To deny this was puerile." Does he have a point? Why do students fall for teachers? What's the dynamic?
5. Thinking of J.M. Coetzee's character in *Disgrace*, the narrator wonders about castration as a "fix" for her friend who, with such frequency, engaged in "disgusting...antics of a dirty old man." Any thoughts?
6. Why do her own students disappoint the narrator? What are the views some espouse in their papers?
7. "If reading really does increase empathy, as we are constantly being told that it does, it appears that writing takes some away." Why does the narrator feel this way about her fellow writers?
8. There is little in *The Friend* when it comes to drama; it's primarily a study of character and an exploration of ideas. Would more action have made a difference to you in terms of how you experienced the book? Nunez also includes a large number of quotations and stories from the works of writers. Are they well integrated into the novel? Did you enjoy them ... or find them distracting?

Discussion Questions from <https://www.litlovers.com>