

## Discussion Questions for *The Robber Bride* (1993)

### GENRE: Myth, Fairy Tale, and Gender

1. The American writer Lewis Hyde has asked, "Why is the Trickster the Messenger of the Gods?" Is Zenia a trickster? Is she also a messenger of the gods, and how? Think of female villains from literature and film. What do they seem to have in common? Is female villainy different from the male variety? The name of the restaurant where Zenia reappears is called *The Toxique*. What role does naming—of persons and places—play in this novel?
2. How does the text partake of the atmosphere of fairy tale? What does it lend to our willingness to suspend our disbelief about the events that unfold? How do motifs related to the supernatural or the occult accrue to the three protagonists as well as to Zenia?
3. Magic can mean two things: sleight of hand played by stage magicians, and true "magic," or supernatural ability. What role does each kind of "magic" play in the novel, if any? Charis may be said to practice a kind of New Age magic. How does Atwood satirize the New Age outlook of Charis? Where might she be said to be in sympathy with it, and on what grounds?
4. Witches are a common figure in fairy tales. How many witches are there in this novel? In what ways does Atwood attempt to subvert gendered expectations or representations of witches? Discuss Charis's grandmother. Do women have a kind of power that is different from male power?
5. The framework for Atwood's novel also derives from the Grimm fairy tale, "[The Robber Bridegroom](#)". How is this story transformed in the novel? Read Atwood's [poem retelling of this fairy tale](#) and compare Zenia to the male characterization of the Robber Bridegroom in both the poem and the Grimm version of the tale. Why does Atwood reverse the gender in her novel? How does this change the character?
6. Fairy tales are often concerned with family relationships, particularly between parents and children. What does the novel offer in its various depictions of fatherhood? How much of a counterforce does it provide to motherhood? What kinds of impact do the protagonists' fathers have on them? What is the status of fatherhood in the contemporary frame of the novel? What about motherhood?
7. Atwood has long refused to sentimentalize the relationships between mothers and daughters (a central motif in fairy tale), and this novel is no exception. How do you explain the situations that develop among the protagonists and their respective mothers? How do you assess Roz and Charis as mothers—and how do their daughters respond to them?
8. Fairy tale might equally be said to illustrate various childhood experiences and rites of passage. How would you characterize the differences and similarities between the childhoods of Tony, Charis, and Roz? For example, during their childhoods they each developed what could be called "dual" identities. How do the psychological devices they developed as children help or hinder them? In what ways do their own children differ from them?

### **THEME: History, War, and Sexual Politics**

1. What are Tony's theories of how history operates? How does her position as a military historian establish a particularly apt context for the issues dealt with in this novel?
2. Compare Charis's views of history and humanity with Tony's? What is the source of the difference? Which perspective does the novel seem to validate?
3. War provides a subtext, and even possibly another framework, for this novel. The male characters are not the only ones affected by it. How are the others affected? How is Zenia affected? Which wars are mentioned?
4. World War II specifically is a virtual character in this text—why? In what ways does it shape the characters' lives, from their childhoods and into their adult experiences and viewpoints? How has WWII become the stuff of legend as well as history?
5. Discuss the poem "The Loneliness of the Military Historian." What does it tell us about differences between the way men and women traditionally deal with violence? Does Atwood make a value judgment?
6. Consider the male lovers of the novel—West, Billy, Mitch. What might be said about the role they play in the protagonists' emotional lives? What seems to be their function in this novel?
7. In *The Robber Bride* Tony says that people like Zenia don't get into your life unless you invite them in. What devices does Zenia use to first enter the lives of Tony, Charis, and Roz? How does she alter her techniques to attract and control men?
8. While seeming all powerful, the constantly changing Zenia lacks a center of her own. Is it possible for women to achieve the same kinds of power that men do today, or do they have to break rules and operate as outlaws? What distinguishes Roz from her comrades-in-arms against Zenia? How was her victimization by Zenia distinct from their experiences?

### **ZENIA: Lies, Revenge, and Murder**

1. Do you regard Zenia as a plausible character? Is she cut out of the same realist material as the other major women figures in the novel? How does she figure in the imaginations of the others? Why do you think she comes back to the scene of her past crimes?
2. Is there a difference between the lies others tell and Zenia's lies? Are there "good" lies and "bad" lies? Do the hearers play a role in the construction of these lies?
3. What do you make of the way Atwood disposes of Zenia? Some critics have cited it as an example of Atwood's difficulty in knowing how to end her novels—do you agree? Is there any justification for having Zenia die in so melodramatic a fashion?
4. What evidence supports the theory that Tony murdered Zenia? What evidence contradicts this theory? Weighing the evidence, do you believe Tony was responsible?

5. Using examples from the story, cite the evidence that Charis committed the murder. What evidence or eyewitness accounts support her innocence? Could she have been responsible?
6. Consider Roz as a potential murder suspect. List her motivation(s) for the crime and any evidence you can find within the story to support or contradict her involvement.
7. Charis remarks, upon finding Zenia dead, that she, Roz and Tony had been Zenia's best friends; this comment changes the context of the story and casts a new light on Zenia. Explain, in your own words, why Roz, Charis and Tony ultimately feel affection for their nemesis, Zenia. What characteristics does each of the three female protagonists share with Zenia? How does it benefit the women to believe that Zenia's powers are invincible?
8. William Blake said of Milton's *Paradise Lost* that Milton often seemed to be of the devil's part without knowing it. Does Atwood have a sneaking sympathy for Zenia? Do you?