

BOOK CLUB NOTES

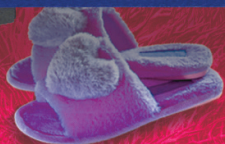
'I loved every page of this funny, warm, delightful novel!'

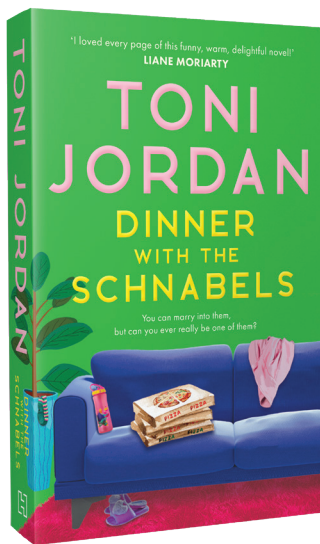
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DINNER WITH THE SCHNABELS

You can marry into them,
but can you ever really be one of them?





BLURB

**You can marry into them, but can you ever really be one of them?
A novel about marriage, love and family.**

Things haven't gone well for Simon Larsen lately. He adores his wife, Tansy, and his children, but since his business failed and he lost the family home, he can't seem to get off the couch.

His larger-than-life in-laws, the Schnabels – Tansy's mother, sister and brother – won't get off his case. To keep everyone happy, Simon needs to do one little job: he has a week to landscape a friend's backyard for an important Schnabel family event.

But as the week progresses, Simon is derailed by the arrival of an unexpected house guest. Then he discovers Tansy is harbouring a secret. As his world spins out of control, who can Simon really count on when the chips are down?

Life with the Schnabels is messy, chaotic and joyful, and *Dinner with the Schnabels* is as heartwarming as it is outrageously funny.



AUTHOR BIO

Toni Jordan has worked as a molecular biologist, quality control chemist, TAB operator and door-to-door aluminium siding salesperson. She is the author of six novels including the international bestseller *Addition*, which was longlisted for the Miles Franklin Award, *Nine Days*, which was awarded Best Fiction at the 2012 Indie Awards and was named in Kirkus Review's top 10 Historical Novels of 2013, and *Our Tiny, Useless Hearts*, which was longlisted for the International Dublin Literary Award. Toni has been published widely in newspapers and magazines. She holds a Bachelor of Science in physiology and a PhD in Creative Arts. Toni lives in Melbourne.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

GENERAL

1. Do you think the novel offers a realistic snapshot of contemporary family life? Why or why not?
2. How does the reading experience of *Dinner with the Schnabels* compare to similar books that navigate modern families, such as *Grown Ups* by Marian Keyes or *I Owe You One* by Sophie Kinsella?
3. A popular theme in current commercial women's fiction is people/faces/outlines on book covers, particularly on illustrated covers. This cover does not feature these stylistic hallmarks, instead highlighting the *traces* of family activity (pizza boxes, a dirty sock, a water bottle). What do you think of this choice? How does this speak to the overarching theme of the novel?

WRITING STYLE

4. *'All of this was incredibly motivating for Simon. See? He was a man with a goal. If he did this job by Saturday, he could be back to his normal life by Sunday. And yet. Right now, it was Monday morning. Early. Time was ticking. Simon had only one week to landscape Naveen's backyard, but he was not there, tilling and shovelling and planting. He was at Southern Cross station with his wife Tansy, waiting for a train.'* (p 6)

The novel is split into six parts, based on the days of the week, starting with Monday. How do these **split sections** orient the reader? How does this stress the **timeline** and centralise Simon's key motivations?

5. What is the role of **satire** in the book? Potential points for discussion: Monica and millennial speech, Simon and long-winded tangents, relationship between Simon and his in-laws
6. Simon tends to stray towards **extended monologues** as a means of communicating his reactions and attitudes. Find an example of this here:

'So early in your house hunt, you cruise around on a Saturday afternoon with a vaguely ironic air. A pink pedestal bathroom sink? A brown ceramic tile splashback? Who are these people? But then pink-pedestal-sink house sells, and the brown-splashback house sells, and you

realise that the music has stopped and your bottom is hanging in midair without a supporting chair of any description while someone else's bottom is on the chair you'd thought was too daggy and now you're a chairless loser and there are fewer chairs than there were before and the next song will be even more competitive. Saturday afternoons ceased to be a joke and became a game of skill and strategy: Risk, but with the potential to ruin your life.' (p 23)

How did these tangents impact you as a reader? Did this strengthen your connection with the protagonist or keep you at a distance



KEY THEMES

Theme #1: Miscommunication

7. Throughout the book, phones are used to punctuate the end of chapters and points of tension, as demonstrated in the following scenes:

'He glanced at the screen. Gloria. His lower intestine twinged and he was all at once incredibly thirsty. He might pay for this later but for now, he pressed decline.' (p 72)

and

'Both Tansy and Naveen would call him back any minute, Simon thought. That's why, when his phone rang a little later, he answered it immediately without looking at the screen. Rookie mistake.' (p 100)

Do you feel this technique effectively progressed the storyline? How did the use of phones accelerate pace in the story?

8. There is a near-constant stream of communication between the characters (phone calls, texts, notes), and yet, everyone remains ignorant of each other's experiences. Why is miscommunication used here as a plot device? What does this convey about family life?

Theme #2: Resilience

9. *Dinner with the Schnabels* explores how families cope with **adversity**, particularly the impact of financial hardship on marital issues and mental health. Did the Schnabels' response to these issues present themselves as authentic? Did their experiences resonate with you?

10. *'But, Simon thought, look at Gloria now. He'd been vaguely terrified of her since he first started dating Tansy, but all at once, Gloria didn't seem so scary. She still remembered how much she'd loved David, once. She'd softened over the decades and gained the wisdom and perspective of life. The vulnerability and grief she was showing now was a side of Gloria he hadn't even imagined. She wanted to stand beside David's grave and farewell him, and pay tribute to their younger days when they meant the world to each other. Simon was moved.'* (p 39)

How has David's past actions of leaving his marriage shaped the characterisation of Gloria? In what other ways does she express her sadness throughout the novel? Discuss this interpretation of **grief**.

11. *'This feeling of heaviness; it wasn't a dream or a weird imagining. It was crushing him from the outside, grinding the bones of his family to dust. He remembered reading something about correct procedures when saving someone from drowning: throw a rope or anything that floats, the article had said. Avoid at all costs diving into deep water to help, no matter how good your intentions. Drowning people panic. They struggle and they writhe and they drag their rescuers under the surface when they sink.'* (p 173)

Here, Simon implies that his depression is a burden to his family. **Mental health** generates much discussion in *Dinner with the Schnabels* – how do you think this conversation is handled? Is it significant that Simon does not consider therapy at any point?



Theme #3: 'What Glitters Isn't Necessarily Gold'

12. *'Meanwhile, his children were buzzing around Monica as though she was the coolest person they'd ever met. Simon remembered when his children thought that he was cool, but that was long ago. Now Monica was cool. Monica was young and free and excited about the world. Once Simon also had huge dreams, wide horizons, a belief in the endless potential of his work. Looking at her, he felt a hundred years old.'* (p 84)

Monica embodies Simon's past (professional success, affluence, savviness), but is also representative of a changing future (new sources of revenue, financial independence, new family). Does Simon's distress stem from his jealousy of her success? Or is he confronted by his inability to embrace **change**?

13. Simon spends most of the book longing for his past success, but eventually arrives at the conclusion that life is defined by **small pleasures**. What factors in the narrative drive this epiphany? Review these two references:

'All at once he longed for a simpler life, for home-delivered orange juice and tram conductors and riding his bike to school and saving up for showbags, but he couldn't remember one single incidence of a younger Simon doing any of those things.' (p 207)

and

'These were not small things. They were big things, and rare, and many people who deserved it were not so lucky as to have kind children and a caring family and a loving, clever wife.' (p 232)

KEY CHARACTERS

Simon

14. Simon positions his **self-worth** as relative to the treatment of those he loves: *'Perhaps he wouldn't be forced into showing this stranger exactly how much he'd failed his family.'* (p 28) What does this say about his character and capacity for empathy? Do you think Simon is too hard on himself?

15. How does the book paint the portrait of a man experiencing a **mid-life crisis**?

16. Do you consider Simon to be a **good father**? Why or why not?

17. Do you think that Simon grows throughout the story? Or is he just as clueless at the end as he was at the beginning?

Monica

18. Early within the book, Simon expresses his discomfort with Monica's arrival. When Tansy offers for Monica to stay with them, this interaction follows:

*'I don't know what to say,' Monica said.
Simon knew what she should say. Say no, thought Simon.
Saynosaynosayno.'* (p 26)

19. Why doesn't Simon like Monica? What are his first impressions of her? Do these impressions ring true, or are they more a reflection of his own insecurities?

20. What barriers separate Simon and Monica? Consider financial security, generation gap, disposition, etc.



21. By the end, where does Monica stand in the Schnabel family? How has she catalysed **external and internal change** in the family?

Gloria

22. Did you find Gloria to be a likeable or unlikeable character? Do you agree with her actions?

23. How do you think Gloria really feels about Simon?

24. Discuss the different perceptions that each family member has of Gloria as the Schnabels' **matriarch**.

25. *'Gloria took a pace forward, placed her bony hands on Monica's shoulders and pulled her into her arms, hugging her. Hugging. Her. It was a genuine hug, a comforting one...*

[cont. later on page] *'There, there,' said Gloria. 'Whatever your father did – and I could go on and on – is no reflection on you.'* (p 221)

Did you expect Gloria's reaction to Monica at the memorial service in Chapter 43?

CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

Pandemic

26. With COVID-19 still being a recent phenomenon, there are few references to the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns in commercial fiction. How did you respond to reading these casual mentions within the novel? See quotes below:

'What if Mia grew up to be the kind of person who didn't believe in community: an anti-vaxxing, driveway-blocking libertarian who didn't recycle and, if there ever was another pandemic, hoarded toilet paper?' (p 154)

'I wasn't the only person to go broke during the lockdown,' Simon continued.' (pp. 19)

'Before the lockdown, before he lost everything.' (pp. 227)

27. What was your read on fictionalised post-pandemic life?

Climate Change Commentary

28. *'Plus, I only promote things that are ethically made, or vintage. People want authenticity. You can't fake that.'* (p 83)

'Those young people were the future. They were idealistic and naive and entirely pure of heart. And yes, he couldn't see how vowels could be dictatorial, but they were asking themselves the most important question anyone can ask: How do I live ethically in the world?' (p 118)

'Sustainability is key,' said Flora, cupping her coffee in both small hands. 'The footprint needs to be measurable but not tokenistic or altruistic.' (p 112)

Dinner with the Schnabels provides several instances of climate change commentary, namely referencing ethical approaches to sustainability. Do you view this as an important inclusion within contemporary literature? Why/why not?



29. What other environmental conversations would you propose engaging with in commercial fiction?

Influencer Culture

30. *“Nope.” Mon was flicking through her phone – the espresso machine manual online.*

‘Breakfast meeting soon.’

‘What is it you do again?’ (p 66)

Simon’s line of questioning shows his confusion with Monica’s disposable income, as she keeps her occupation a secret. We find out in Chapter 16 that Monica is a social media influencer.

Do you agree with Simon’s disapproval? Share your support or criticisms of self-made influencers.

31. Does Simon’s reaction to Monica’s job speak frankly to society’s divisive approval/dismissal of influencer culture?

Potential points for discussion: Content creators as small business owners, old-world capitalism vs. new-world capitalism, business initiative.

