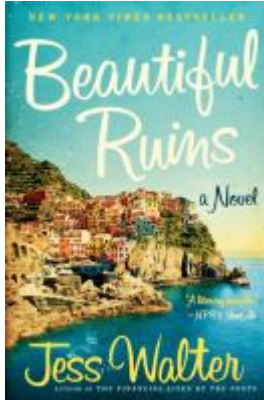


**Oliver Wolcott Library**  
**Beautiful Ruins by Jess Walter**  
**Book Discussion Guide**  
**Prepared by Patricia Moore**



**About the Book:**

From the moment it opens—on a rocky patch of Italian coastline, circa 1962, when a daydreaming young innkeeper looks out over the water and spies a mysterious woman approaching him on a boat—Jess Walter’s *Beautiful Ruins* is a dazzling, yet deeply human, roller coaster of a novel. From the lavish set of Cleopatra to the shabby revelry of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, to the back lots of contemporary Hollywood, *Beautiful Ruins* is gloriously inventive and constantly surprising—a story of flawed yet fascinating people navigating the rocky shores of their lives while clinging to their improbable dreams.

*Source: ReadingGroupGuides.com*

**About the Author:**

Jess Walter is the author of six novels, including the national bestseller *The Financial Lives of the Poets*, the National Book Award finalist *The Zero*, and *Citizen Vince*, winner of the Edgar Award for best novel. His collection of short fiction, *We Live in Water*, has just been published by Harper Perennial. He lives in Spokane, Washington.

*Source: ReadingGroupGuides.com*

**Book Reviews:**

“A brilliant, madcap meditation on fate. . . . Walter’s prose is a joy-funny, brash, witty and rich with ironic twists. He’s taken all of the tricks of the postmodern novel and scoured out the cynicism, making for a novel that’s life-affirming but never saccharine.” -- *Kirkus Reviews (starred review)*

“His [Walter’s] characters are long-suffering, prone to failure and sometimes at death’s door. But the verve and enthusiasm of this novel, from its let’s-go-everywhere structure to the comedy in the marrow of its sentences, are wholly life-affirming.” -- *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“[A] high-wire feat of bravura storytelling. . . . [Walter’s] mixture of pathos and comedy stirs the heart and amuses as it also rescues us from the all too human pain that is the motor of this complex and ever-evolving novel.” -- *New York Times Book Review*

“His masterpiece . . . an interlocking, continent-hopping, decade-spanning novel with heart and pathos to burn, all big dreams, lost loves, deep longings and damn near perfect.” – *Salon*

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What does the title, *Beautiful Ruins*, refer to and how does it capture the essence of the novel?
2. At the beginning of the story, Pasquale Tursi is waiting “for life to come and find him.” Is Dee Moray the “life” he was waiting for? Do you think most people wait for life—like a movie—to begin? Why?
3. When he first sees Dee, Pasquale thinks, “Life is a blatant act of imagination.” Explain what he means. Do you agree with Pasquale?
4. Most of the novel’s characters—Alvis Bender, Dee Moray, Shane Wheeler, Claire Silver, Pat Bender, even Richard Burton—have dreams. What are these dreams and how do they parallel and collide? How do their dreams play out in their lives? What would life be like if we didn’t have dreams? What happens when they don’t come true?
5. Americans pride themselves on the “American dream.” What does this term mean to you? Do you think it is still attainable today? How much of our notions of the American Dream are shaped by Hollywood? Think about Shane Wheeler, the screenwriter, whose life’s motto is Act as if ye have faith and it shall be given to you: “His was an outlook fed by years of episodic TV, by encouraging teachers and counselors, by science fair ribbons, participant medals, and soccer and basketball trophies—and, most of all, by two attentive and dutiful parents, who raise their five perfect children with the belief—hell, with the birthing—that as long as they had faith in themselves, they could be anything they wanted to be.” Is faith enough—or hard work—to make our dreams come true? Can we truly be, achieve, or do anything we desire?
6. Claire Silver, the chief development assistant for legendary film producer Michael Deane, was enchanted by the magic of Hollywood when she saw *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* two days before her tenth birthday. How do you think this movie shaped who she became? Was it for better or for worse? Is it the idea of fame that draws people to Hollywood, or something else? Is Hollywood as influential on lives today as it was through much of the twentieth century?
7. How would you characterize Michael Deane? One reviewer commented that he “has finer hidden instincts than the ones he has allowed to shape his life.” When we meet him, Michael Deane seems like a parody of a Hollywood producer. What are the driving forces that propel his actions and how do they confound our expectations?
8. At the center of the novel, though largely offstage, is the legendary Hollywood production of *Cleopatra*. How is the movie symbolic of the novel’s themes? How does Hollywood both fuel fantasies and destroy dreams? How is this demonstrated in the experiences of the novel’s characters?
9. In Hollywood, everything happens because of the pitch. Have we become a nation of individuals pitching to each other? How would you pitch your life story to someone? How would you pitch *Beautiful Ruins*?

10. In the present day, the elderly Pasquale shares the story of his first meeting with Dee, describing it as “the moment that lasts forever.” Why is this so for Pasquale? How does this revelation influence Shane and Claire? Have you ever had a moment like this?

11. How do dreams—like love—inspire us and hurt us? Do you agree with Michael’s adage: we want what we want? Do you think this changes with age and maturity?

12. Years later, Alvin tells Dee, “All we have is the story we tell. Everything we do, every decision we make, our strength, weakness, motivation, history and character—what we believe—none of it is real; it’s all part of the story we tell. But here’s the thing: It’s our goddamned story!” What about life—your own or someone you know—is real? How much do we control in our lives? What happens when we let other people tell our story for us?

13. How would you describe Beautiful Ruins?

*Source: ReadingGroupGuides.com*

### **Further Reading:**

#### The Pirate’s Daughter by Margaret Cezair-Thompson

In 1946, Hollywood’s most famous swashbuckler, Errol Flynn, arrived in Jamaica in a storm-ravaged boat. After a long and celebrated career on the silver screen, Flynn spent the last years of his life on a small island off the Jamaican coast, where he fell in love with the people, the paradisiacal setting, and the privacy, and brought a touch of Tinseltown glamour to the West Indian community.

Based on those years, *The Pirate’s Daughter* imagines an affair between the aging matinee star and Ida, a beautiful local girl. Flynn’s affections are unpredictable but that doesn’t stop Ida from dreaming of a life with him, especially after the birth of their daughter, May.

#### High Fidelity by Nick Hornby

Rob is a pop music junkie who runs his own semi-failing record store. His girlfriend, Laura, has just left him for the guy upstairs, and Rob is both miserable and relieved. After all, could he have spent his life with someone who has a bad record collection? Rob seeks refuge in the company of the offbeat clerks at his store, who endlessly review their top five films (*Reservoir Dogs*...); top five Elvis Costello songs (“Alison”...); top five episodes of *Cheers* (the one where Woody sang his stupid song to Kelly...). Rob tries dating a singer whose rendition of “Baby, I Love Your Way” makes him cry. But maybe it’s just that he’s always wanted to sleep with someone who has a record contract. Then he sees Laura again. And Rob begins to think (awful as it sounds) that life as an episode of thirtysomething, with all the kids and marriages and barbecues and k.d. lang CD’s that this implies, might not be so bad.

#### One Day by David Nichols

It’s 1988 and Dexter Mayhew and Emma Morley have only just met. But after only one day together, they cannot stop thinking about one another. Over twenty years, snapshots of that relationship are revealed on the same day—July 15th—of each year. Dex and Em face squabbles and fights, hopes and missed opportunities, laughter and tears. And as the true meaning of this one crucial day is revealed, they must come to grips with the nature of love and life itself.

Where'd You Go, Bernadette?: A Novel by Maria Semple

Bernadette Fox is notorious. To her Microsoft-guru husband, she's a fearlessly opinionated partner; to fellow private-school mothers in Seattle, she's a disgrace; to design mavens, she's a revolutionary architect, and to 15-year-old Bee, she is a best friend and, simply, Mom.

Then Bernadette disappears. It began when Bee aced her report card and claimed her promised reward: a family trip to Antarctica. But Bernadette's intensifying allergy to Seattle--and people in general--has made her so agoraphobic that a virtual assistant in India now runs her most basic errands. A trip to the end of the earth is problematic.

To find her mother, Bee compiles email messages, official documents, secret correspondence--creating a compulsively readable and touching novel about misplaced genius and a mother and daughter's role in an absurd world.

One Last Thing Before I Go: A Novel by Jonathan Tropper

"Mistakes have been made." Drew Silver has begun to accept that life isn't going to turn out as he expected. His fleeting fame as the drummer for a one-hit wonder rock band is nearly a decade behind him. His ex-wife is about to marry a terrific guy. And his Princeton-bound teenage daughter Casey has just confided in him that she's pregnant—because Silver is the one she cares least about letting down.

So when Silver learns that he requires emergency life-saving heart surgery, he makes the radical decision to refuse the operation, choosing instead to spend what time he has left to repair his relationship with Casey, become a better man, and live in the moment—even if that moment isn't going to last very long. As his exasperated family looks on, Silver grapples with the ultimate question of whether or not his own life is worth saving.

Financial Lives of the Poets by Jess Walter

*The Financial Lives of the Poets* is a comic and heartfelt novel from National Book Award nominee Jess Walter, author of *Citizen Vince* and *The Zero*, about how we get to the edge of ruin—and how we begin to make our way back.

Walter tells the story of Matt Prior, who's losing his job, his wife, his house, and his mind—until, all of a sudden, he discovers a way that he might just possibly be able to save it all . . . and have a pretty damn great time doing it.

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~This book discussion guide including the further reading recommendation list was prepared by the Oliver Wolcott Library.