

“I tore right through *The Copywriter*. What a delight! . . .

A surprise, a joke, and/or an idea in every line.”

—ELIF BATUMAN, author of Pulitzer Prize finalist *THE IDIOT*

THE

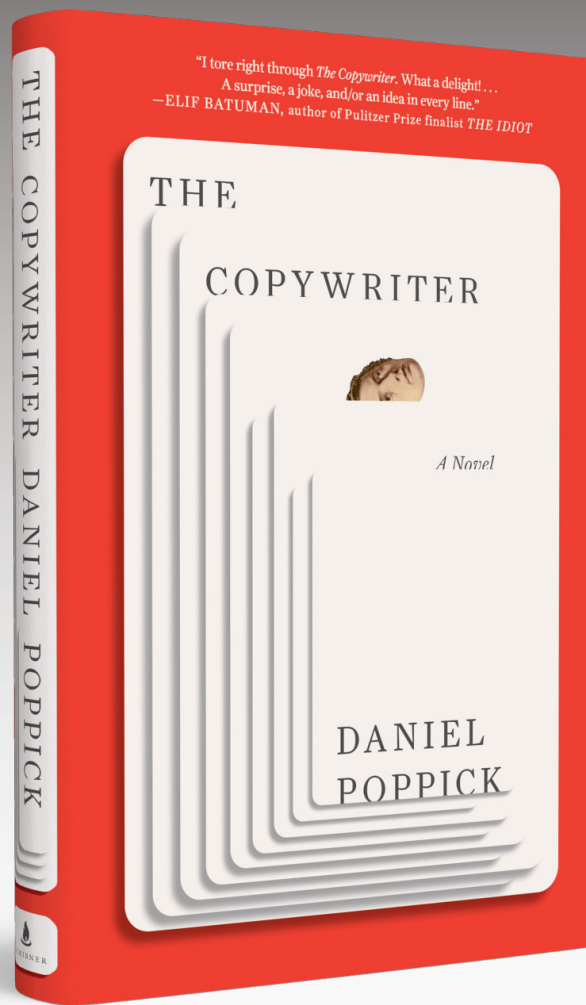
COPYWRITER



A Novel

DANIEL
POPPICK

READING GROUP GUIDE



This reading group guide for *The Copywriter* includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

Introduction

*Everything has a schedule,
if you can find out what it is.*

It's the summer of 2017 and, D_, a poet eking out a living as a copywriter for a start-up, notices a looming dissolution on the horizon. Whether it's the impending layoffs at his company run by a clueless CEO, the unraveling of his relationship with his longtime girlfriend, or the way the country is staggering through the delirium of Trump's first year in office, D_ senses that something is fraying, maybe has been for years.

So he begins a notebook: dreams, overheard conversations, emails, scenes from his life—scraps he calls parables. Maybe if he records everything, he'll catch the hidden tempo, the schedule that undergirds his life, something that can untie art from labor, self from work.

In *The Copywriter*, two years unfurl in fragmented seasons under low-wattage florescence, exposing the same inescapable questions: How should an artist balance a job and a life when art doesn't fit neatly into either category? Is it necessary to extract "meaning" from work that so often seems designed to parody the very concept of meaning? What concessions do we make for the sake of a paycheck? What does all of this do to our art, to our souls?

A comic examination of the spiritual gulf between art and labor, *The Copywriter* is a portrait of a poet in an open-plan office, asking what meaning, if any, can be found there.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. The copywriter wanders the absurd corridors of contemporary employment, tracing how a trivial job can quietly colonize the spirit. In what ways does the protagonist resist, or attempt to resist, the engulfing of his art by his labor?
2. Consider the author's note, which opens with the line: "I believe in the reality of absent things. If something isn't here, it must be somewhere else" (page vii). How does this statement shape our understanding of the story's fictionality? Do you interpret the note as belonging to Daniel Poppick himself or to the character D_? Why do you think the protagonist is referred to only as D_?

3. D_ laments the culture of corporate job-seeking: “I open LinkedIn, a website whose founders should face trial at the Hague” (page 99). In what ways does the LinkedIn-era of self-marketing, with its emphasis on self-promotion and reduction of talent to marketable assets, bleed into the art or “real” worlds? How does the pressure to package and market oneself—as if writing classified ads for the self—distort art and personal identity?
4. Consider the opening line of the June 2017 notebook: “The wind erases a line in the sand” (page 3). What does this line and image suggest about the nature of time or other forces and their capacity to reshape or swallow up previously held beliefs or positions? Discuss how this metaphor might be applied to questions of “selling out,” conformity, or resistance. How might the line highlight the malleability or impermanence of one’s stances or beliefs?
5. D_ maintains a close-knit group of friends, bonded by their shared love of poetry despite the different life paths they embark on. What sustains their friendship, and what does the novel say about the role of friendship throughout adulthood? Discuss the importance of friendship--how do relationships evolve over time, and in what ways have your own friendships endured or shifted?
6. The novel frames millennials’ angst and their protracted adolescence as tied to the effects of the Great Recession. When D_ observes that “Adults of my generation—traumatized by the disastrous economy that awaited us when we graduated college—are in a lifelong process of self-infantilization” (page 21), what specific behaviors, attitudes toward adulthood, and labor or relational dynamics seem shaped by the economic crisis? Or might these attitudes, behaviors, and relationships instead be symptomatic of some other cultural influence that has contributed to existential anxieties observable among millennials? To what extent are similar tendencies observable among members of Gen Z?
7. The novel is a narrative that takes on many forms: a love story, a breakup story, a road-trip novel, a diary, a collage—a nesting-doll novel about art and storytelling—to oneself, to others. Discuss the various forms that *The Copywriter* took for you during your reading experience. In what ways does the novel’s shape-shifting design bolster its themes of self-inquiry, revelation, and the conundrums inherent to art-making and laboring?
8. The line “No art, no melody, no time that is not bound up in some dark labor” (page 24) offers a view of art and time that is inseparable from exploitation and commodification of the self. Do you agree that all art is or will inevitably become complicit in “dark labor,” or can art exist as a space of freedom and resistance against it? Have members of your group pick a side and defend their positions.

9. Eliza seems to have opted out of the rat race that D_ and his friends, to varying extents, are all still running. What do you make of her character? Discuss your theories on why she decided to live as an off-the-grid recluse in the woods. Why do you think she continues writing, and scrapping, a novel that no one else might ever see?
10. Discuss the role of power in the novel. Who is powerless and who wields power? How is power exercised, and what are the moral or psychic consequences for those who have the authority to subjugate others? How do they reconcile (or fail to reconcile) their actions with their conscience?
11. Examine the dissolution of Lucy and D_'s seven-year relationship. What specific tensions or moments in the text signal towards the unraveling of their relationship? To what extent does D_'s lack of ambition or professional success contribute to the breakup, and does the novel suggest that greater achievement would have secured the relationship? Or were there deeper emotional or personal fractures that made their separation inevitable?
12. The protagonist takes a moral objection to his assigned task of writing an event description for a lecture by a prominent former US statesman who is "widely despised all over the world for the bloodshed and destruction resulting from his policies" (page 196). He refuses, demonstrating an insistence on personal integrity over complicity as he draws "a line in the sand" (page 206). His refusal exposes the precariousness of dissent under capitalism, where survival is bound to labor and obedience to authority. Discuss with your group the effects of standing up for what you believe in, even if you endanger your career mobility, security, and overall livelihood. What are the benefits of doing this? Is it ever possible to fully resist without sacrificing one's livelihood—and if so, at what cost?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Keep your own "copywriter's notebook"! Record the parables, overhead lines, and dreams of your own life.
2. Select one of the books quoted in the epigraph, George Eliot's *Middlemarch* or the sixth installment in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* series, *The Fugitive*, for your next book club pick! Discuss with your group how *The Copywriter* resembles these works' meditations on the balancing of individual desires with societal expectations, the art of introspection, and search for some essential truth.
3. Cast a film or television series adaptation of *The Copywriter*! Who would you cast in the role of D_, Lucy, the twenty-four-year-old CEO, Ruth, Will, the parents, and other roles?