Study Questions for Gish Jen's *The Love Wife* (2004)
--Peter Schmidt

As usual, select the questions and topics that most interest you, after finishing the novel. The early questions are more introductory and general; the later ones, more advanced and specific.

This novel is unusual in that it has six characters that I believe are of equal importance: Carnegie Wong and Blondie, of course, but also Mama Wong and Lan, plus I would add Lizzie and Wendy, the Wongs' adopted daughters. Discuss your impressions of their characters: what first impression did each make on you? (give examples) how well do they know themselves? How do they treat others? What scenes are especially memorable for each in revealing their characters? What key developments happen to each to reveal something important about each later in the novel?

Discuss how you understand the conflicts and misunderstandings between Blondie and Lan. To what degree are these caused by differences in temperament or character or experience? To what degree are these do to their upbringing in China vs. the United States? (For instance, consider their different assumptions about mothering children, children sleeping alone, etc.) Blondie in many ways feels that Lan has invaded and taken over her family (see her comment on p. 4 for just an early example). To what degree can you understand her feelings? In what ways do you think Blondie's feelings reflect more a failure on her part than a fault of Lan's?

For this novel of the new American family, Gish Jen has invented a new narrative form that, as far as I know, is unprecedented in the history of fiction. Yet it seems absolutely right to me, a brilliant invention. What is it? She has the whole family tell its stories— with each voice and each point of view of equal weight. The voices are highly individualized and, after a few pages, immediately recognizable and fitted to their characters of each speaker. Yet, when you think of it, Jen's "collective" form of story-telling is also extremely mysterious. At times it appears that, as in a drama on stage, the characters hear each other and immediately respond to what another has said—p. 105, for instance. At other times, their comments are more like a soliloquy spoken privately to themselves, or to us—making us a part of the "family" who will understand (see pp. 94-95 for some examples). Furthermore, sometimes the "stories" are told almost simultaneous with the action; at other times they are told retrospectively, giving Jen great flexibility in handling the novel's plot. Note how well Jen's story-telling invention fits Mama Wong's credo on p. 376, as imagined by Carnegie: "*You can be rich in money, and of course, this is good. But you can be rich in story, and this is good too*."

How did you respond to this invention as a reader? How effective and right is it to tell a family's story by having all the family members tell their different versions? Does this *fragment* the family into incompatible and isolated separate visions, unable to communicate to each other? Or in some mysterious way does it create a kind of shared consciousness (perhaps in us?) that can *unite* the separate voices, understanding them compassionately.

The topic of American racism is very important in the novel. Discuss Blondie's criticism of American racism, especially as it will affect her adopted daughters—vs. her own failures in this regard, not just her sense that Lan has "invaded" and taken over her American "home," but also her panic when in China. (Like many whites, she's not used to being a racial minority in either a small group or in large crowds; she feels constantly watched, anxious, insecure, and unable to be "invisible.") Compare these moments of racial panic to Blondie's liberal ideals, her love of nature, her love of Chinese culture, and comments such as the following, when she tries to teach her children not to believe in stereotypes: "In this family we do not generalize. In this family we keep an open mind" (6).

Compare Blondie's ideas and contradictions about America's racism with Carnegie's responses to it.

The "Sue's beach" episode (and related scenes set at the Bailey farm house) expose American racism and xenophobia pretty brutally (330, for example). Discuss what relevance these scenes have to the rest of the novel—most of the major characters are absent from them.

Curiously, when we learn the family history of the white and supposedly "all-American" Baileys, it is a history of displacements; they hardly have stable roots or a home place passed down from one generation to the next. See pp. 66-67 for one version of their history (but it comes out in many places in the novel and is very relevant for understanding Blondie). Discuss the relevance of this "old" family's history to understanding the history of the "new" American family represented by the Wongs, of mixed races and mixed biological and adopted children—and it's an "extended" rather than nuclear family as well, counting Lan and Mama Wong (which perhaps makes it rather traditional rather than solely "new"?).

Now some questions about the revelation at the novel's end, pp. 368ff, with the appearance of a mysterious book in the mail. If you haven't finished the novel yet, beware: the following contains spoilers.

Discuss Carnegie's vision during his heart attack and Mama Wong's message to him from beyond the grave.
- What provokes Carnegie's heart attack?
- Why does this discovery upset him so?
- What did Mama Wong do, and why, involving Lan? Does her rough treatment of her son (even after her death, in his vision) signify her disdain of him or her love? Does Mama Wong (in his vision) bond with Carnegie in the end, or disown him?
- What is Mama Wong's vision of a "natural family"? (Be careful: this is a trick question.)
- Does Mama Wong's revelation about Carnegie's past imprison him or free him?
- What's the meaning of Carnegie's dream: are we most strongly shaped by nature or blood—or culture?

Is the novel's title accurate? Or is it ironic and inaccurate?

How is all this related to the novel's vision of a family as shared stories and responsibilities, not blood ties?
In what ways is this a parable about the new American family, both as a family and a nation? (Or perhaps it's not so new—perhaps "America" has been this kind of family for a long time?)

What do you make of Blondie's behavior in the last scenes of the novel?
It contrasts markedly with that of Wendy—which may be why this wise young girl is given the last word. Discuss Wendy's wisdom at the end about what makes a family, despite all the scars: 378-79. Consider the double meaning of "we made it." Does it make sense that Wendy gets to inherit Mama Wong's family book? (but she'll "share" it, of course!)

At one point when Carnegie, near death, is having his out of the body vision, he says "Now, who can I give this to?" (315). What does Carnegie mean?

Along with the suggestion that, to be real, a family must be "rich in story," Wendy's "this world can disappear like any other" (67, 378-79) is a kind of credo for the whole book. What is the meaning of this phrase, which Wendy borrows from her Great-grandma Dotie (Blondie's grandmother) and uses as a kind of refrain at the end?

Compare this novel's vision of family to that of other works you've read for your group this year—to *My Antonia*, or *The Zigzag Way*, or *The Corrections*, for instance. Would you agree that each in its own way uses its central family story to reimagine how the history of this *nation* may be understood? Discuss this, explaining why you agree or disagree.

The Love Wife, in my opinion, has some serious flaws, especially in plot development. Some of the later episodes involving Lan's love life may have been a serious mistake, for instance; I'm not sure they fit her character and distract us from the Wongs' story. (Would you agree?) But I think the vast majority of the book is brilliant and moving and *daring*—and this makes me forgive everything. What do you think? Can you think of other novels that have flaws or mistakes—and yet are somehow better than much more superficially "perfect" books?

If you enjoyed this novel, I highly recommend these other works by Gish Jen:
 Who's Irish? Stories
 Mona in the Promised Land (novel)
 Typical American (novel)