

Imposture

Reading Group Guide

A Conversation with the Author

*This book seems to be a departure from your last novel, *Fathers and Daughters*, which was set at a high school in New York. What made you write a historical novel?*

My first novel, *The Syme Papers*, blent historical and contemporary elements; I am happy writing in both modes. The fact is, the mode itself seems less important to me than the things it allows me to talk about. I like to write about the moment in my characters' lives when they decide whether or not the place they have made for themselves in the world can satisfy their sense of who they are. Do they agree with the view other people have of their real selves? If not, how can they live with the difference? High school seemed a good place to talk about that moment: the interplay between students and teachers makes vivid the contrast between how people think their lives will turn out, and how they do, in fact, turn out. The life and times of Lord Byron seemed another starting-point for writing about that contrast.

Why Lord Byron?

He was, really, the first celebrity writer. As he said himself, after the publication of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*: 'I awoke one morning and found myself famous'. One of his works sold over ten thousand copies on the day of publication, to a reading public a fraction of the size of the one we have now. Men imitated him; women threw themselves at him. The poetry itself described how wide his experience of life was: there was nothing he didn't dare to try. Eventually, this got him into trouble: his relationship with his half-sister Augusta, and the resulting separation from his wife, forced him into a kind of exile. But wherever he went, he remained the center of his little world. It was very hard for other people to live with; they couldn't take the contrast. *Imposture* is about one of those people.

So it's not about Lord Byron?

Lord Byron is a character in the book, but the story is really about his doctor, a man named Polidori, who accompanied Byron briefly on his exile from England, until the poet grew tired of his antics, and dismissed him. Polidori wanted to be a writer, too, and continually attempted to foist his manuscripts onto Byron and his friends, who always mocked his work. Byron's other friends became rather more famous: he spent some of that summer in the company of the poet Shelley and his wife Mary, who wrote the novel *Frankenstein*, as her part in a kind of ghost-story contest they decided to hold.

Polidori was bright (he was the youngest doctor to graduate from Edinburgh University, at the age of nineteen), ambitious, and handsome, but he lacked whatever it was that made Byron so interesting to everyone else, some vital ability to enjoy and relate to the

world. When Byron dismissed him, he fell on hard times: he had seen too clearly what he amounted to. My novel begins at a moment that promises to usher in a change in his fortunes. His own ghost-story, called *The Vampyre*, has just been published, without his approval and under Byron's name. It has become a best-seller. He chases down the publisher to get his share of the credit, and runs into a young woman, a Byron fan, who mistakes him for the poet. The novel is about their relationship.

How much of the story is true?

The honest answer (and this is not a question that writers like to answer honestly), is that almost nothing in it is completely true, and not much in it is completely invented either. 'Pure invention is but the talent of a liar,' Lord Byron himself once remarked. On the other hand, it was more important for me to get the story right, on its own terms, than to get the history right. That said, the history itself was compelling enough to be useful. Lord Byron *did* have a doctor named Polidori, whose ghost-story was published, more or less, under Byron's name and became a best-seller. Many of the details of the love story are drawn from period documents.

What I wanted to do, really, was to write a novel in keeping with the spirit of the Romantics: with the spirit of writers like Jane Austen and Walter Scott. The Romantic style offered these writers a wonderful freedom: it allowed them to discuss moral questions and interior lives with a sort of detachment and precision that one hardly dares to now. There's a kind of pressure, these days, to be colloquial, which can be limiting, too. Romantic novelists often used pacy and dramatic plots to argue out interesting philosophical questions. It was one of these questions that led me to write *Imposture*: to what extent does our success in life reflect who we are?

The novel has quite an elaborate preface. I've already asked you, how much of the book is true, so I won't ask it again. But can you discuss what part the preface plays in the story as a whole?

Maybe that's a point I should save for the discussion questions. The preface has a certain amount of grunt work to do: there's a history to the story no reader can be expected to know, and I didn't want to burden the plot with it, so I put it in the preface. That decision was related to the fact that I didn't set out to write a traditional historical novel, in which the history itself is one of the characters. I wanted to write a contemporary novel, only the age to which it seems contemporary isn't our own.

As an ambition that may seem a little strange. On the other hand, it seems to me the job of a novel to enter the language and way of thinking of its characters, and I am interested in the language of the Romantics just as I might be interested in, say, a particular American idiom. The preface, and Peter Pattieson, the 'author' of the novel, allow me to question the extent to which people are creatures of their times. Not much, he wants to say; and I have a lot of sympathy for his view. Peter also allows me to tie *Imposture* in with *Fathers and Daughters*: to show how the concerns of each book relate to each other. As it happens, such prefaces were a peculiarly Romantic device. Walter Scott, for

example, to keep up his anonymity, played on the idea of narrative frames in a way that might seem to us now distinctly modern.

This novel has a lot to do with writers and writing; that's probably inevitable in a story about Lord Byron. Were you worried, though, that writing about writers might involve you in a kind of shop-talk—interesting to novelists, but not so interesting to other people?

I was a little worried, yes. In fact, though, the personal experience that had the most to do with *Imposture* had nothing to do with writing. I spent a year after college playing basketball for a small second division team in Germany. The star of our league was a young kid named Dirk Nowitski—he has since gone on to greater things. What's terrible about basketball, I quickly realized, is that it leaves you nowhere to hide your failures. The better are pretty easily separated from the worse. Athletes, even at that level, are competitive and ambitious people: it's hard for them (it was hard for me) to live with the self-knowledge that the game forces on you, especially since the hierarchies of talent that grow up on the court also play their part off it.

The leader of our team was a former CBA player trying to work his way back home through the European leagues. He was wonderfully talented, but he couldn't bring himself to admit just how much better than he could ever dream of being Nowitski was going to get. His delusions were sometimes painful to watch. On the other hand, basketball leaves a lot of room for other kinds of consolation and pride. What would it be like, I wondered, for a *writer* to feel such a contrast—which is when I stumbled on the idea of a novel about Polidori. What does it mean for him to be a worse or a lesser writer than Lord Byron? Did he see the world less clearly? Did he feel it less richly? understand it worse? love it more clumsily? These are all questions, of course, that might be expected to bother writers; on the other hand, I think they have a broader reach, too—and could trouble anyone who has ever compared himself to a sibling, a lover, a colleague, a friend, etc. These are some of the questions I wanted to write about in *Imposture*.

Discussion Questions

1. How does the preface change the way we read the novel? If we had read it *after* the story, would that have affected our opinion of what happened in it?
2. In what ways are Polidori and Eliza Esmond alike? unlike?
3. What does Polidori's father mean by the phrase 'the force of impossible comparisons'?
4. Beatrice, Eliza's sister, and Gaetano, Polidori's father, stand in the novel for the voices of common sense. Have they been proved right in the end?
5. The novel, as its title suggests, examines the idea of imposture. Characters imitate and reflect each other: as, for example, Polidori and Byron do. Are there other pairs of characters in the book who mirror each other in some way?
6. Byron, Polidori, Shelley etc. are not only characters in *Imposture* but historical figures. Do their 'real' stories have any relevance to the novel itself? Does the novel make an issue of that question?

7. What does Polidori learn at the theater? Is there something else he should have learned?
8. Polidori's story is called 'The Vampyre', and there are frequent references in the novel to blood. How is his story played out in the novel itself? Who is the real vampyre?
9. What happened in Italy between Polidori, Frances, and Lord Byron? Brother and sister at one point discuss the question of forgiveness. What do they have to forgive each other for? Who should forgive whom?
10. Does Eliza Esmond love Polidori or Lord Byron?