

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS

Fire and Air, by Erik Vlamminck, translated by Paul Vincent

1. *Fire and Air* opens with a bitter exchange between Mina and Elly that illustrates a chronically unpleasant mother/child relationship. Is your perception of that exchange different by the end of the book? Why, or why not?
2. “We say exactly the same thing. We mean something totally different,” Elly observes of another bitter conversation with her mother Mina (p. 5). Throughout *Fire and Air*, words exchanged between characters frequently clash and collide, even as they — the words and the people — seem to have a lot in common. Sometimes the clashes are attributed to real or perceived differences in languages or cultures, but what are some of the other reasons why those who ostensibly love each other have such difficulty communicating?
3. Elly’s father remarks on how windows open inward all over the world, except in the Netherlands. The Dutch windows that open outward cannot be properly cleaned, but according to Gaston, the Dutch refuse to change them. He says that “giving in” is simply not in the Dutch dictionary. Whether or not this is true, what is Gaston trying to prove with his assertion?
4. Elly describes the house she lived in with her father, Gaston, and her mother, Mina, as lacking locks and door handles, in addition to being “inferior” in many other ways. What do her descriptions suggest? How does Elly’s representation of her childhood home compare to representations of the other domestic spaces and residences in the book (for example, the pigeon lofts and the madhouse)?
5. Consider the significance of the book title, *Fire and Air*. While there are many literal and figurative examples of fire in the story, there are fewer obvious references to air. What role does each element play in the novel?

6. Many examples of pairings can be found throughout the novel of pairings. For example, there are cities called Delhi in both Canada and India. There are two elephants: Jumbo and Tom Thumb. Some of the pairings are of large and small versions of the same things; others are dual, twinned or mirrored versions of characters or elements; there are two wives; and there are two women named Elly. Provide three more examples of pairings and discuss their individual and cumulative significance.
7. What effect do recurring images of physical injury and disfigurement — such as Elly's cutting and Gaston's dream of being sewn up with big cross stitches — have on the overall tone of *Fire and Air*?
8. "Because it doesn't fit in with the feminist agenda, women don't want to admit it, but they're actually longing for pain," says Elly to her daughter Linda (p. 157). How is Elly's provocative statement borne out, or not, by different women in *Fire and Air*?
9. The power and mystique of names pervades the entire novel. Elly takes Martha's name and names her daughter Linda after Martha's own daughter. Gaston is also known as Tony, as perhaps befits a man living more than one life. There is more than one creature named Jumbo over the course of the story. What are some other examples of names, nicknames, and labels that are layered on different characters throughout the novel? What is the significance of these names and their slippery usage?
10. "I realized that the pigeons were to him what Jumbo is to me and almighty God is to my mother," says Elly (p. 187). What do you think best explains Elly's lifelong fascination with Jumbo the elephant? Was her reverence for Jumbo really the same as Gaston's connection to his pigeons, and Mina's to her religion?
11. Mina contends, "Lorenzo is someone who, like us, has never come home" (p. 197). What important function does Lorenzo serve in the story?
12. Linda learns Mina's secrets from a letter that was never sent. Why didn't Mina send the letter?

13. *Fire and Air* brings together a multitude of voices that often give deeper insight into some of the novel's key incidents and stories by repeating them from very different points of view. At the end of the novel, after weighing all perspectives, is there one narrator that you might judge to be the most trustworthy of them all? Are there any characters that you might label as being misunderstood? Why or why not?