

## ***INSTANCES OF THE NUMBER THREE*** Reading Group Guide

1. The opening lines of the novel suggests the line of its title: a literal "threesome" of husband, wife, mistress. And yet this is only one of many examples of "three" in the book. The Preface also talks about the number three calling it a "protean number". "Protean" means "able to assume many shapes, variable, versatile". How is the number three relevant to the book? Is it, finally, a creative?
2. "Most women in Bridget's shoes would have detested Frances. But this is not an account of feminine jealousy, or even revenge, and not all human beings (not even women) conform to the attitudes generally expected of them." The tone of this, as in much of the novel, is ironic. Salley Vickers has described herself, in an interview, as a "subversive" writer. In all her books she takes situations and gives them an unusual perspective or angle. How does the Bridget/Frances relationship demonstrate this and what do the two women learn from it and about themselves? Does Peter's death ultimately help them become more developed and fulfilled? And what does this tell us about loss, jealousy etc.
3. In several of Salley Vickers's novels loneliness is a theme. Bridget, Frances and Peter are all in different ways lonely. "It is unlikely that Peter himself was aware that his extramarital escapades had more to do with an incapability with his own loneliness than the outward appearance he was quietly proud of ..." Salley Vickers has suggested that "we are all lonely". Do you agree with her? How does loneliness affect the lives of the characters in "instances"? Does it have any positive outcomes?
4. Bridget is a complex, not always immediately likeable, character.(On the whole, women like her better than men - does this mean anything?) But Bridget changes during the course of the book? What factors lead to her change and do you think that for a book to be enjoyable we must always necessarily like all the characters?
5. In "Miss Garnet's Angel" Salley Vickers has *The Book of Tobit* running throughout as a parallel to or commentary on the contemporary story of Julia Garnet. In "instances of the Number Three" the companion story is the tragedy of "Hamlet". "Hamlet" begins with a ghost seeking revenge. How is revenge relevant in this story, and to life in general, and does Salley Vickers suggest that we can learn something from what happens in "hamlet"?
6. In all Salley Vickers's books there is a theme of the often lively and creative relationship between the living and the dead but in this book it is a central part of the action. Peter tells us he is in Purgatory the place where, in pre-Reformation Christian thought the dead go to expiate their "sins". Salley Vickers appears to take this idea literally but do you think it has some other, metaphorical point? Is the idea of Purgatory an outmoded one or do we all know what it might be like?
7. Early on in the book, Bridget says to Frances, "A person ... isn't only flesh and blood. A person exists inside one, informing one's state of mind." "Instances of the Number Three" is also a book about mourning and memory. We have tended to lose touch, today, with the rituals of mourning. Has Peter's appearance as a "ghost" or "revenant" and his dialogues with Bridget anything to tell us about the mourning process? Do people we have been close to ever fully leave us?
8. In all Salley Vickers' novels what appears on the face of it to be "bad" or negative will often have some kind of valuable influence or outcome. But she also suggests that we get trapped in certain modes of being which we can't help. Do you think this is true of Zahin? Has he changed by the end of the novel - and why?

9. During one of Peter's conversations with Bridget he says "Zelda wasn't real so she died when I did. Only the real survives here." And at the end of the novel, Frances says, "You've been a real friend, Bridget" and Bridget answers, 'I don't know if I've been a friend but someone - something - has shown me that what matter is to be real.'" What does she mean by this? There is a good deal in the book about reality, imagination and illusion. How "real" are Zahin, Zelda, Peter's ghost, the ghost of Hamlet's father, an actor playing the part of Hamlet, or even minor characters like Ed Bittle, Lottie or Gloria (Stan's wife)? What might the book be saying about what we think of as "real" and "unreal"?

10. Stan gives Bridget a book of the seventeenth century poet - and dean of St Paul's - John Donne's sermons. A quotation from one of these forms the book's epigraph.

'I doubt not of my own salvation; and in whom can I have such occasion of doubt as in my Self? When I come to heaven, shall I be able to say to any there, "Lord! how got you hither?" Was any man less likely to come hither than I?'

What is John Donne saying about himself and about the need for mercy and forgiveness? And how does this theme play throughout "Instances of the Number Three"?