

## The Apology

### Eve Ensler

The following questions are intended to enhance your discussion of Eve Ensler's *The Apology*.

#### About this book

Sexually and physically abused by her father, Eve Ensler has struggled her whole life from this betrayal, longing for an honest reckoning from a man who is long dead. *The Apology*, written by Eve from her father's point of view, in the words she longed to hear, attempts to transform the abuse she suffered with truthfulness, compassion, and an expansive vision for the future.

#### For discussion

In the short preface to the book, Ensler writes, "This letter is my attempt to endow my father with the will and the words to cross the border, and speak the language, of apology so that I can finally be free."

1. Eve Ensler has written the apology she needed to hear, in the voice of her father, Arthur Ensler. In the short preface to the book, she writes, "He will not make an apology. So it must be imagined. For it is in our imagination that we can dream across boundaries, deepen the narrative, and design alternative outcomes." Discuss these ways that she suggests imagination affects reality. Are there others? How does imagination connect to the idea of empathy?
2. As a reader in the position of "overhearing" this apology, how do you feel about the narrative voice? What are some of the effects of Eve's choice to speak as her father? How would the book be different—and how might you experience it differently—if it were written as a traditional memoir?
3. "Many of the living do not believe they are in relationship with the dead," the imagined Arthur writes, and he describes what he believes that relationship in fact to be (pp 10–11). Do you find this vision hopeful? Frightening? Do you also perceive your relationship with loved ones who have died as an ongoing one?
4. What does it mean to apologize? On pages 9–10, Arthur offers his own definition of an apology, and his aims in apologizing—as well as Eve's guidelines. "What is an apology?" he asks. "It is a humbling" (9). Do you agree with the various definitions and rules for apology the book offers? And what do you make of Arthur's claim that "the telling is not meant to elicit understanding or forgiveness" (9)? In the preface, Eve writes that this apology is necessary "so that [she] can finally be free." How are forgiveness and freedom connected? How are they distinct?
5. Arthur also says that he will do his best "to neither justify nor rationalize [his] actions" (9). Do you think his account succeeds in this? How would you distinguish justification and rationalization from explanation, or the "logic" of abuse he describes—of how it escalates, and the interplay between physical and emotional abuse?

6. Arthur begins his apology with an account of his childhood--his strict upbringing and his torment at the hands of his older brother (pp 13–22). How does this frame for you what follows? Thinking of both Arthur and Eve, how do their experiences in childhood affect their adult lives? In what ways does Eve repeat patterns from childhood and how does she break them?
7. Discuss the figure of the Shadow Man. In the book, he is described as “the tortured man,” the sorrow and pain that “metastasized into an entity and returned as a most terrifying fiend”—the self that becomes the abuser (23). “I realize I am speaking of him in the third person,” Arthur says. “I am by no means attempting to escape responsibility for his actions” (23). How might it be helpful or hurtful to conceive of a part of ourselves as a separate entity in this way?
8. In this father-to-daughter apology, Eve’s mother, Chris, and her unnamed siblings have only peripheral roles. Arthur describes Chris as “a cowed and devoted accomplice,” “forced... to choose her husband over her daughter” (pp 4–5). What do you make of Chris as a character? What does it mean to be a forced accomplice?
9. Arthur describes on several occasions trying to undermine Eve’s authority, to depict her as a liar (pp. 3, 5, 59–61). What purpose does this serve, and how does it amplify the other abuse? How do we link ideas of authority and authorship? If you’re familiar with other work by Ensler, like *The Vagina Monologues*, how might ideas of authority be especially relevant to that work?
10. We see Arthur cry twice in the book—once when Eve’s cat, Backhand, is hit by a car (65–67), and once as a child, when his mother knocks a baby sparrow from his hand (102–103). How does he explain his emotions in these two instances? What connections can you draw between them?
11. Arthur remembers Eve’s graduation from college as a turning point, one he has “rehashed... in limbo a million times over” (90). After Eve delivers the keynote address, he refuses to acknowledge the speech, then hands her a thousand-dollar check. “My obligations were fulfilled,” he says (92). How do you understand this money—in terms of power and vulnerability, obligation and debt? Is it a kind of apology, or its opposite?
12. Beyond Arthur’s specific crimes, the book also looks at larger problems of masculinity in our culture. Arthur sees himself as a part of “a chain of generals, conquerors, CEOs, con men, tyrants, thieves...” In this “kingdom of men,” he says, “an apologist is a traitor of the highest order” (81–83). Earlier, Arthur explains, “I was brought up in a time when men were praised for controlling and withholding their emotions. . . The thrust of a man’s existence was to maintain his position” (69). Does this generalization seem accurate? How much of it do you think is, as he suggests, generational? What are the broader consequences of this way of thinking? And what are the broader implications and possibilities of apology—the humility and vulnerability of it—in the culture?
13. Arthur narrates, or writes, his apology from a kind of limbo, where “each wrong you’ve caused in your life . . . constructs your confinement” (8). At the end of his apology, he finds himself inside Eve’s body, the body injured by his abuse: “I now see, I have been spinning for

thirty-one years in the torturous limbo I made inside you . . . in the desperate abyss of your waiting” (111). How do you connect these two ideas of limbo, cosmic and internal? How do they recall the relationship between the living and the dead discussed in Question 3?

14. Arthur’s apology ends with a series of pleas: “Let me sit here at the final hour. Let me get it right this time . . .” etc (112). Earlier in the text, one of Arthur’s definitions of apology is “confession in the deepest sense” (9). Is there also a connection to prayer?

15. Discuss the final line of the book: “Old man, be gone” (112). How might this relate to the idea of the Shadow Man? To the “chain” or “kingdom” of men? Who is the speaker of the final line—Arthur or Eve?

### **Further reading**

*The Vagina Monologues* by Eve Ensler, *In the Body of the World* by Eve Ensler, *Tiger, Tiger* by Margaux Fragoso, *The Kiss* by Kathryn Harrison, *Heavy: An American Memoir* by Kiese Laymon, *Things We Didn’t Talk About When I Was a Girl* by Jeannie Vanasco