

# Nero Book Club Notes

**TITLE:** Dietland

**AUTHOR:** Sarai Walker

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**SUBJECT:** Fiction

## *Book description*

Plum Kettle does her best not to be noticed, because when you're fat, to be noticed is to be judged. Or mocked. Or worse. She works answering fan mail for a popular teen magazine, and is biding her time until her weight-loss surgery. Only then can her "true life" as a thin person finally begin.

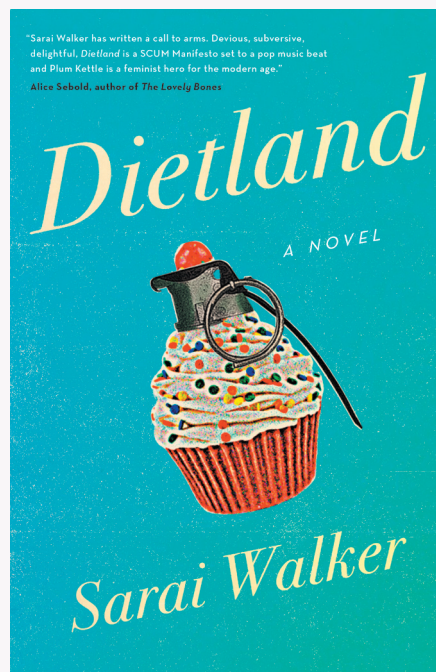
But when Plum notices she's being followed by a mysterious woman in colorful tights and combat boots, she finds herself falling down a rabbit hole into the world of Calliope House, a community of women who live life on their own terms. Reluctant but intrigued, Plum agrees to a series of challenges that force her to deal with the real costs of becoming "beautiful." At the same time, a dangerous guerrilla group begins to terrorize a world that mistreats women, and as Plum grapples with her personal struggles, she becomes entangled in a sinister plot. The consequences are explosive.

Part coming-of-age story, part revenge fantasy, *Dietland* is a bold, original, and funny debut novel that takes on the beauty industry, gender inequality, and our weight-loss obsession from the inside out – and with fists flying.

## *A reader's introduction*

*'I'm every American woman's worst nightmare. It's what they spend their lives fighting against, it's why they diet and exercise and have plastic surgery – because they don't want to look like me'* (p102).

Like millions of women, Plum (real name Alicia) Kettle has lived most of her life in Dietland. In *Alice in Wonderland*, which is referenced throughout this novel,



Alice grows and shrinks. In *Dietland*, women are not expected to grow but only to shrink away to virtually nothing, to focus solely on being 'fuckable'. *Dietland* the novel is about Plum's transformation from a woman obedient to the rules of Dietland to a woman who recognises the need to discover her own way and finds the strength to follow it.

Plum's story is told alongside accounts of the vigilante actions of a feminist terrorist organisation called Jennifer, so named to stand for ordinary women. We are also told of the terrible crimes against women and girls for which Jennifer is seeking revenge. As well as killing individuals for their crimes, Jennifer acts against the systematic objectification of women in the media, advertising, the porn industry – wherever it occurs.

Through the letters Plum gets from girls who read the magazine she works for, *Daisy Chain*, we are reminded of what society does to young women and girls. Stories of self-harm, self-loathing, sexual abuse and more horrors so fill Plum's inbox that she becomes overwhelmed and numb.

Through Verena Baptist, the daughter of the woman who set up the diet business that so entranced Plum as

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a teenager, Plum is introduced to the feminine and feminist world of Calliope House. It is through Verena and the other women there that Plum is able to change. Here is an alternative to *Dietland*, *Daisy Chain*, and also Jennifer.

As this anti-chick lit novel defies our expectations, we are left to think about the best way to change ourselves and change the world.

## **Praise for *Dietland***

‘Part *Fight Club*, part feminist manifesto, an offbeat and genre-bending novel that aims high – and delivers.’— *Kirkus Review*

‘Sarai Walker has written a call to arms. Devious, subversive, delightful, *Dietland* is a Scum Manifesto set to a pop music beat, and Plum Kettle is a feminist hero for the modern age.’— Alice Sebold, author of *The Lovely Bones*

‘Sarai Walker’s audacious, hilarious – yet surprisingly touching – novel begins by spoofing the weight-loss industry and moves on to a devastating fantasy in which an avenger known as ‘Jennifer’ targets men who prey on women. Through it all marches Plum, a fat woman who learns to love herself as she is, and whom I loved at all stages of her education. Keenly intelligent, daring, and original, *Dietland* has something important to say to us all.’—Alice Mattison, author of *When We Argued All Night* and *The Book Borrower*

‘The first rule of *Dietland* is you should definitely talk about *Dietland*. And I suspect you’ll want to. Gather your book clubs, gather all the Jennifers you know! At first you’ll think you’re reading a familiar story: a woman who works at a women’s magazine tries to lose weight. And then POW! *Dietland* lithely moves in ways and to places you won’t expect. Sarai Walker has a wonderfully curious mind, and this is an impressive, ambitious first novel.’—Gabrielle Zevin, bestselling author of *The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry*

‘*Dietland* is a book I have been waiting for someone to write all my life, and it hit me hard right where I live, right where so many of us have wasted too much time living. It’s courageous, compassionate, intelligent, pissed off and much more fun than it has any right to be.

I can think of twenty people I want to buy it for, without even trying.’—Pam Houston, author of *Contents May Have Shifted*

‘Sarai Walker is an immensely talented writer and her debut novel, *Dietland* – filled with wit, wisdom and wonder – is a pleasure.’—Jill McCorkle, author of *Life After Life*

## **About the author**

**Sarai Walker** received her MFA in creative writing from Bennington College. Her articles have appeared in national publications, including *Seventeen* and *Mademoiselle*, and she served as an editor and writer for *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, before moving to London and then Paris to complete a PhD. She currently lives in the New York City area. *Dietland* is her first novel.



## **Questions for discussion**

1. Is this book a call to arms – a manifesto as much as a novel? Can fiction create social change in the way that the two fictional non-fiction books do in the novel (*Adventures in Dietland* and *Fuckability Theory*)? Can individuals change the way women are treated?
2. Did reading this book change your mind about anything? Did it change how you feel about your body and/or about women’s bodies? Did it change your ideas about society and its treatment of women? Will it change your behaviour?
3. Is the book an accurate reflection of how women are treated in contemporary Western society?
4. Are you living in Dietland? Does it mean living with ‘control, constriction – paralysis, even – but above all obedience’ (p202)?
5. Verena declares: ‘I abhor violence and destruction’ (p99). Plum is more ambivalent about the actions of the Jennifer group, and understands the desire to hurt the haters. What about you? Do you think there is ever a place for vigilantism? Should Plum have given Leeta the money? Would you have?

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6. Discuss how the two storylines – Plum’s personal story and the descriptions of the Jennifer developments – run parallel. Would one have worked without the other?
7. Is it important that Soledad was in the army? Did this influence her decisions? It is hard not to sympathise with the character, but do you sympathise with her decisions?
8. At the start of the novel, Plum is waiting for her real life to begin (p6). Have you ever done this, or are you doing this? What were you waiting for? Is there someone else inside you waiting to get out, as Plum thinks Alicia is inside her?
9. As the New Baptist Plan gets underway, Plum makes clear to Verena that she wasn’t molested or raped, and Verena acknowledges that Plum isn’t fat because of ‘some deep psychological trauma’ (p105). Not long after though, Plum admits ‘there was a wound somewhere, deep inside me’ (p115). What is this wound? Does it get healed?
10. Did the ending defy your expectations? What do you think Plum will do next?
11. Did you find Plum’s transformation believable?
12. Plum thinks of Kitty’s girls as ‘an army of annoying and persistent ants’ (p26). Why do you think she feels that way? What do you think of her answers to the girls’ emails, both pre the New Baptist Plan and after? Did she do the right thing when she deleted the unanswered emails?
13. Posing as one of Kitty’s girls, Julia sends an email asking ‘Who is more oppressed – a woman covered from head to toe in a burka or one of the bikini-clad models in your magazine?’ (p70). Do you agree with Plum’s answer, which she writes in Kitty’s voice, that they are two sides of the same coin?
14. Does Plum ever really figure out Julia? What do you make of her? What about Leeta?
15. Plum thinks that Alicia ‘will be loved’ (p108) in a way that Plum is not. Is that what we all want most of all?
16. What do you think of the background character of Plum’s mother? Does mother know best in this book? What does her character tell us about the themes of the novel? What about other background characters like the TV and radio personalities that provide commentary on the Jennifer group? What is their role in the novel?
17. Would you like to spend time at Calliope House?
18. What about Marlowe’s porn room? Do you agree that to understand the ‘objectification of women, you need to face it’ (193)?
19. How do you think Plum and the other women at Calliope House would respond to the NotAllMen hashtag?
20. Sarai Walker acknowledges the influence of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Fight Club*. Discuss the parallels and why you think Walker might have chosen those books as a starting point for her novel.