

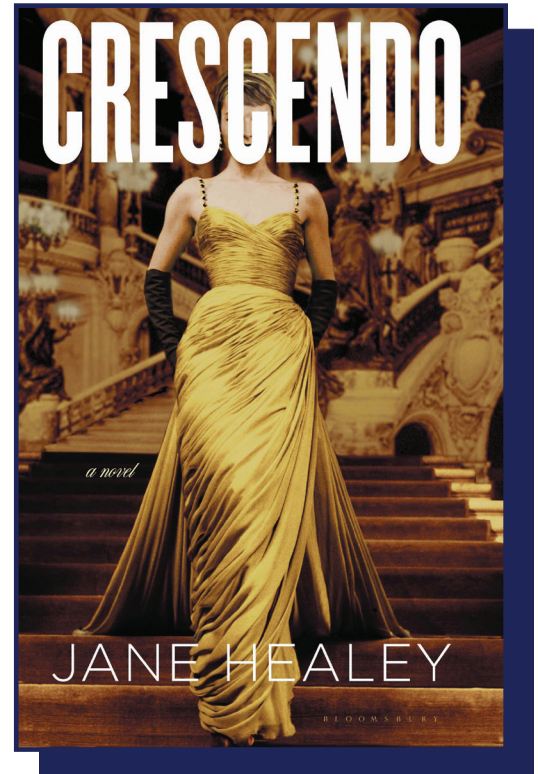


Crescendo by Jane Healey

Questions for Discussion

Please note: Some of these questions contain spoilers.

1. Max is introduced as both a prodigy and a spectacle. How does the novel interrogate the idea of genius? What is gained or lost by being extraordinary?
2. Natasha occupies multiple roles: sister, manager, caretaker, observer. How do these overlapping identities complicate her sense of self?
3. The sibling relationship between Natasha and Max is intensely intertwined—emotionally, professionally, even physically (shared rooms, routines, histories). How would you characterize the power dynamic between Max and Natasha? Does it shift over time?
4. The novel repeatedly explores the relationship between artist and audience. What does the audience gain or lose control of when Max plays, and what remains hidden?
5. Consider the theme of jealousy, particularly Natasha's. Is it rooted in ambition, love, resentment, or something else? How does it evolve across the narrative?
6. The touring life is depicted as both glamorous and lonely. How does the novel complicate the idea of success through travel, luxury, and fame—especially during postwar Europe?
7. How does the novel portray gender expectations, particularly for women like Natasha? Where do you see her constrained—and where does she exercise agency?
8. Consider the role of memory and retrospection, especially in Max's narration. How reliable do you find his perspective? How does hindsight shape the story being told?



9. The relationship between Max and the comte is marked by an intensity that exceeds simple admiration. How does the novel blur the boundary between artistic reverence, emotional intimacy, and erotic attraction? Where do you see that tension most clearly?
10. Max's interior life is often inaccessible, even to Natasha. How does the novel handle ambiguity around his sexuality? Do you read his desires as repressed, sublimated into music, or intentionally left unresolved?
11. How does the historical setting (mid-twentieth century, global touring circuits and artistic salons, postwar cultural life) shape the characters' opportunities and constraints?
12. The piano is frequently described in almost human or animalistic terms. How does this personification deepen the novel's exploration of obsession, mastery, and control?
13. In Henri's interactions with Max, how do power, admiration, and desire intersect? Is his attraction toward Max himself, or what Max represents—genius, beauty, control, or vulnerability?
14. The novel opens with a meditation on the piano as a percussive instrument, something almost violent beneath its beauty, and revisits this idea at the end when Natasha and Henri's son is revealed to be a violinist. How does this framing shape your understanding of music, performance, and control throughout the book? Passion and violence?
15. How would you define *Crescendo* as a novel: a story about ambition, dependence, performing and spectating, artistry, identity, or something else? What moments most shaped your interpretation?