How It All Began

Discussion Questions

1. *How It All Began* is a book about reading and writing. What does reading give to Lively’s more literate characters? What does the absence of reading deny to the others?

2. How might Lively’s application of chaos theory to human relations conflict with the idea of a divinely ordered universe? What quarrels might a religious person have with Lively’s representation of events and their causes?

3. Given the randomness of events in the world that Lively describes, where seemingly wicked events can produce unforeseen happy results, how is it possible to distinguish good from evil?

4. Lively is fond of inserting historians into her fiction. What precisely does a character like Lord Henry contribute to the mood and structure of *How It All Began*?

5. What are the differences in the ways in which Charlotte and Lord Henry confront old age? Which approach should we admire more?

6. Charlotte’s mugger notwithstanding, the characters who come closest to true evil in *How It All Began* are unscrupulous professional men like the grasping solicitor Paul Newsome and the amoral financier George Harrington. What does Lively appear to think about the ethics of powerful people in the modern age?

7. Lively shows us two married couples whose shared lives are endangered by infidelities, either real or contemplated. How might these two subplots be compared and contrasted?

8. *How It All Began* is acutely conscious of the European debt crisis. However, the novel’s embattled characters tend to have either marketable skills or salable property that they can eventually fall back on. How might *How It All Began* have been different if Lively had chosen to make her characters’ circumstances more dire?

9. What does *How It All Began* suggest about the effect of television on the intellectual culture of Britain? Does Lord Henry, for all of his dry pomposity, deserve more of a soapbox than electronic media are prepared to give him? What characteristics does Lively seem to most admire in a woman?
10. What traits does she evidently most despise in a man?

11. Does Rose make the right choice between Gerry and Anton? What are the arguments on either side of this question?

12. Near the end of *How It All Began*, Lively gives us a glimpse of the baby who lives next door to Charlotte. How does this brief insertion fit in thematically with the rest of the novel?

13. Charlotte observes that the modern novel has tried to free itself of messages but that they still seem to “creep in here and there” (69). What messages do you think have crept into *How It All Began*, and did Lively really try all that hard to keep them out?

(Answers provided by publisher.)