

Double Negative, by David Carkeet
Discussion Questions

Poor Jeremy Cook is saddled with a lecture on names that he has to deliver to a local civic club. Although he complains about the tedium of his subject, he is surrounded by names that are pregnant with meaning. How are these names significant: Stiph, Orffmann, Aaskhugh, Woeps, Milke, Wach, (Paula) Nouvelles, (Lieutenant) Leaf?

Whom did you suspect of the killings? When did you suspect them and why? Does the actual killer ever tip his hand?

The author once commented that he wanted Cook's linguistic research on the language of young Wally Woeps to play a role in solving the mystery, but he faced a problem in that the killings happened well after Wally's bedtime. How did the author address this problem?

Jeremy Cook struggles to solve two mysteries in the novel—(a) who among his colleagues is a killer, and (b) who slandered him at work? Cook successfully exposes the murderer at the end of the story. He lays to rest the other mystery in his life by concluding that there was no slander after all. Is his conclusion about this other mystery correct?

We never learn directly whom Arthur Stiph was going to meet at the Wabash Institute on the night he was killed. Do we learn it indirectly? If so, how did Stiph know that that person would be there at that hour?

What is the theme or main point of *Double Negative*? Where does it receive its clearest statement?

Double Negative was first published in 1980. In what ways does the book reflect American culture of that time?

The author has acknowledged his debt to three books that influenced the writing of *Double Negative*. One is *Learning How to Mean*, a scholarly monograph by British linguist M.A.K. Halliday, who studied “idiophenomena” in his toddler son just as Cook studied them in Wally. Another is Peter Dickinson's *The Poison Oracle*, a mystery about linguistic research in a primate center. The third is Kingsley Amis' classic comic novel, *Lucky Jim*. You might know Dickinson's or Amis' novels. If so, can you point to similarities between them and *Double Negative*?

Jeremy and Paula's romance, sparked in 1980 with *Double Negative*, reignites in *The Full Catastrophe* (1990) and *The Error of Our Ways* (1997). If you've read either of these books, what differences do you see in these characters and their relationship from book to book?