

**Discussion Guide for
Familiaris by David Wroblewski**

1. For those of you who have also read Wroblewski's debut novel, how did the events of FAMILIARIS enhance your understanding of Gar and Claude's relationship and their family history?
2. The Peshtigo fire was a real event that occurred in Wisconsin on October 8, 1871. Its place in history is overshadowed by the Great Chicago Fire, which started on the very same day. Had you heard of the Peshtigo fire before reading FAMILIARIS? How does the inclusion of this historical event impact the story?
3. Do any of the canine characters in FAMILIARIS remind you of a dog that has been part of your life? How do these dogs influence the story and the characters' lives?
4. The friendship between John and Frank is tested throughout the book. How does their dynamic change over the course of their lives? What events or realizations drive these changes?
5. Oprah described the book as brilliantly intertwining history, philosophy, adventure, and mysticism. Which aspect of the story (history, philosophy, adventure, mysticism) resonated most with you, and why?
6. Wroblewski spoke about Edgar's grandfather, John, emerging as a significant character while writing "Edgar Sawtelle." How did you perceive John's character evolution throughout "Familiaris"? Did you find him as intriguing as Wroblewski did?
7. In your opinion, what does Ida want? What does Nyx want? Do they work together, or are they often at cross purposes? Who is in control?
8. There are many pair-wise relationships in the novel: John and Mary, So Jack and Granddaddy, John and Elbow, Walter and Ida, etc. How can each of these be thought of as a love story? Which relationship resonated most with you?
9. What is Elbow's relationship to wood? How does his work speak for him? Similarly, what about Frank's relationship to food? How do their crafts define their characters?
10. At the end of Part III, John dreams of the first dogs who lived alongside humans. What does this dream mean to you? What do you think it means to John?

11. Claude brings chaos and deceit to his relationships. In your opinion, does his darkness come from within or without, and is this a universal trait? How do you interpret his character's actions and motivations?
12. If you could have a conversation with your younger self and your older self, as John does with Ida's help in Part III, what would you want to say? How might these conversations alter your perspective on your current life?
13. The categories the Sawtelles use to classify their dogs — Searcher, Consoler, Challenger, Defender — can also be used to describe the human characters in the story. How would you assign these roles to the characters? Do some characters fit more than one role?
14. Wroblewski mentioned John being born with "an extra share of whimsy." How do you interpret this whimsy in John's actions and decisions? Do you see whimsy as a strength or a challenge for him?
15. John, Mary, Gar, and Claude are a family of extremely talented dog trainers, and the reader gets a detailed look at that process. Did any aspects of their work surprise you? What did you learn about the bond between humans and dogs from these sections?
16. How does the author differentiate each canine character from the others? Do you have a favorite canine character in FAMILIARIS, and why?
17. Watching the Sawtelles and their friends over decades explores the broader contours of life experience — starting with their big dreams as they seek what Drencher would call their "singularism." Do you feel that the characters achieved a version of their dreams? Would Drencher say so?
18. The part-human, part-supernatural character known to the Sawtelles as Ida Paine powerfully redirects several events, changing their outcomes and effectively turning back time. Do you see Ida as a force for good, or something more complicated?
19. How does the farm environment shape the narrative and the characters' lives? Have you ever felt a strong connection to a particular place that influenced your life significantly?
20. The book is divided into five great quests. Which quest did you find most impactful, and why? How do these quests mirror the real-life journeys people undertake?

21. John convinces his friends to join him on his quests by asking, "Suppose you could do one impossible thing." What impossible thing would you choose to do, and why?
22. In the prologue, David Wroblewski writes, "The same would be true for each of the great quests in John Sawtelle's life." How would you describe the great quests in John Sawtelle's life? Which quest did you find most compelling, and why?
23. Mary is the strong, sensible, joyful backbone of the Sawtelle farm. She is talented at rerouting a conversation or course of action to a better result – at times she is an agitator, at times a peacekeeper. Which events in the book are changed by her intervention, and how does her character influence the overall story?
24. John often uses the prompt, "Suppose you could do one impossible thing." This phrase becomes his ethos for approaching life's challenges. How does each character interpret it? How would you interpret this phrase in your own life?
25. The text *Practical Agriculture and Free Will* by the fictional thinker George Solomon Drencher turns up regularly in *FAMILIARIS*, quoted sincerely by John and as a punch line by others. The characters find guidance in its passages despite its overblown verbosity. How does the book unify the characters' life stages? Did any Drencherian quotes stand out to you for their strange practicality?
26. Throughout the novel, So Jack encourages many characters to have heart-to-heart conversations with Granddaddy. Why do you think he does this, and how do the characters benefit from these conversations?
27. How did you envision the dogs while reading, and why? What role do you think dogs play in conveying the themes of family and loyalty in the story?
28. The title "Familiaris" has multiple meanings, including family and canine connections. How do you see these dual meanings reflected in the story? Do you agree with Wroblewski's choice of title?
29. If you have read "The Story of Edgar Sawtelle," how does "Familiaris" change or enhance your understanding of the Sawtelle family? If you haven't read it, how do you think the prequel stands on its own?
30. Why does Claude decide to leave at the end of Part IV? What might he fear about staying? Do you think he made the right decision?

31. What does the novel say to you about friendship? What about love? Grief? How do these themes intertwine and influence the characters' lives?
32. The book explores living one's true purpose. How do the characters' quests reflect their search for meaning? Can you relate to their journeys in your own search for purpose?
33. Think about active mourning versus passive mourning, especially as it relates to John. How do these forms of mourning affect his actions and relationships?
34. Compare John's time at the rooming house with his time at the farm. What kind of community does John create in each place? How do these communities reflect his character and growth?
35. What does it tell you about John's character that he never tells Frank the truth about the necker knob? Do you think Frank knows this, consciously or unconsciously?
36. Which character do you most relate to, and why? How do their experiences mirror or differ from your own?
37. Discuss the following terms as they relate to the novel: agency, choice, fate, optimism, creation, knowledge, yearning. How do these themes drive the characters' actions and shape the narrative?
38. Wroblewski drew on his own experiences growing up on a farm in Wisconsin. How do you think his personal background enhanced the authenticity of the setting and characters in "Familiaris"? Can you relate any specific scenes to your own experiences?
39. Based on the ending of "Familiaris," what future quests do you envision for John or other characters? How do you think their stories would continue beyond the book?