



## The Night Listener

By Armistead Maupin  
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### Introduction

The narrator of *The Night Listener* is Gabriel Noone, a late-night radio storyteller who has risen to national fame in San Francisco. Having just separated from his lover of ten years, Noone is adrift in pain and confusion when he receives unexpected comfort from a thirteen-year-old fan in Wisconsin. Pete Lomax, a gifted writer himself, has somehow survived--and skillfully recorded--a life of unimaginable abuse. Wise beyond his years, he becomes a sort of surrogate son to the storyteller through a series of long distance phone calls. But, just as the clouds begin to part for Gabriel, a question arises that casts doubt upon the very existence of this miracle child. Desperate for the truth, Gabriel begins an odyssey that will throw his own stormy relationships--familial, romantic, and erotic--into sharp perspective. A personal saga that turns into a mystery that turns back into a personal saga again, *The Night Listener* keeps us guessing as it keeps us reading. Along the way Maupin brilliantly explores the question of how we tell stories, to whom, and why. **Questions for Discussion**

1. In the first chapter Gabriel tells us about "the Jewelled Elephant Syndrome," his tendency to embellish stories to make them more complete and satisfying. Do you think this is a conscious act? To what extent does it affect his relationship with Jess? With his father? Does it ultimately make us question Gabriel's reliability as a narrator?
2. Some readers have noted Gabriel's resemblance to Maupin himself, a writer who gained prominence as a serial storyteller. Is he inviting us to speculate about the truth of this novel even as we consider the truth of Pete's story? Are we meant to wonder if Maupin actually had such a friendship with such a boy? And if he did, why would he not write a nonfiction book about it? Is he, like Gabriel, using fiction "to fix the things that have to be fixed"?
3. Throughout the novel Maupin continually blurs the line between reality and illusion. Gabriel's bookkeeper, Anna, was a character in Maupin's Tales of the City series, so we're confronted here with the incongruity of an author (Maupin) conversing with one of his own fictional creations. Will and Jamie, the gay couple in Gabriel's "Noone at Night," are meant to represent Gabriel and Jess, just as Gabriel and Jess are apparently modeled on Maupin and his ex-lover Terry Anderson. What do you think the author intended by these disorienting layers of fact and invention? Is he just having fun with his own lore? Or is he suggesting that only emotional truths are of real importance?
4. Did Pete's language and insights strike you as overly mature? Were you suspicious of him before Jess raised the issue, or did you share Gabriel's outrage at the suggestion of a hoax? How do you explain Gabriel's inertia when it came to uncovering the truth?
5. How do long-held secrets and tensions between fathers and sons affect the narrative of *The Night Listener*?
6. Did Donna's motherly protectiveness strike you as overzealous? Is it plausible that she would go to such great lengths to protect Pete from exposure at the expense of his literary success? Did her attitude towards Gabriel in their face-to-face meeting seem appropriately righteous, or false? Why?
7. There are at least six deaths and two resurrections in *The Night Listener*? How did each of them affect Gabriel's sense of abandonment and loss? Did Pete's resurrection give you hope for his existence or finally confirm him as a figment of Donna's imagination? Pap's resurrection at the end of the novel seems to imply that Gabriel invented his father's deathbed scene in order to reconcile with him through storytelling. Did you wonder if Armistead Maupin was attempting the same thing in *The Night Listener*?
8. Maupin has said that *The Night Listener* is, in part, "about the power of the human voice and its capacity to comfort and seduce us." Does that apply to Pete or Gabriel or both of them? To whom does the novel's title refer?

**About the Author:** Armistead Maupin is an internationally bestselling author whose narrative strengths have been compared to those of Charles Dickens. His Tales of the City series began as a serial in the San Francisco Chronicle in 1976 and went on to become six novels and a trio of award-winning television miniseries. Maupin is also the author of the 1992 novel, *Maybe the Moon*. His recording of *The Night Listener* was named one of the two best audio books of the year by Publishers Weekly. He lives in San Francisco.