



The Financial Lives of the Poets

By Jess Walter
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Introduction

A few years ago, small-time finance journalist Matthew Prior quit his day job to gamble everything on a quixotic notion: a Web site devoted to financial journalism in the form of blank verse. When his big idea and his wife's eBay resale business ends with a whimper (and a garage full of unwanted figurines), they borrow and borrow, whistling past the graveyard of their uncertain dreams.

One morning Matt wakes up to find himself jobless, hobbled with debt, spying on his wife's online flirtation, and six days away from losing his home. *Is this really how things were supposed to end up for me*, he wonders: staying up all night worried, driving to 7-Eleven in the middle of the night to get milk for his boys, and falling in with two local degenerates after they offer him a hit of high-grade marijuana?

Or, he thinks, *could this be the solution to all of my problems?*

Questions for Discussion

1. Given their different ages and social worlds, what explains Matt Prior's willingness to befriend Jamie and Skeet at the local 7-Eleven?
2. How does Lisa Prior's past experience with financial insecurity impact her feelings about Matt as they weather their current money crisis?
3. What does Matt hope to achieve by seeking out Lisa's current flirtation, Chuck Stehne, and to what extent does he succeed?
4. What does Matt's vision for online investment poetry, poetfolio.com, represent to him, and why does he connect its failure to his own personal shortcomings?
5. What does Matt's decision to keep his nascent drug dealing a secret from Lisa reveal about the state of his marriage?
6. How would you characterize Matt's feelings about his mostly senile father?
7. How does Matt relate his and Lisa's obsession with their house to the wider cult of home ownership during the housing bubble?
8. Why does Matt reveal the truth of his identity as a confidential informant to Bea?
9. To what extent do Dave's and Monte's reactions to Matt's becoming a confidential informant for the police seem atypical of most druglords?
10. How did you interpret the final line of the novel: "And Lisa and me we're okay."? To what extent do you read that line as ambiguous?

About the Author

Jess Walter is the author of *The Zero*, a finalist for the National Book Award; *Citizen Vince*, a winner of the Edgar Award for Best Novel; *Land of the Blind*; and *Over Tumbled Graves*, a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year. Also the author of the nonfiction book, *Ruby Ridge*, he lives in Spokane, Washington, with his family.