SOME BACKGROUND:

This book tells the story of the troubled and consequential year in which Chaucer got the idea for the Canterbury Tales. It looks back to events that got him into his predicament in the first place, and ahead to his eventual triumph. But it isn't a cradle-to-grave biography. Students wanting that might be encouraged to look at Derek Pearsall, The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer (Blackwell, 1992).

My ultimate hope is that students reading this book will also want to read the Canterbury Tales, or at least read generously within them. Students enrolled in a semester-long Chaucer course should have every incentive to read his poetry in the original Middle English, which isn't nearly as hard as it is rumored to be. It's really just a matter of accustoming oneself to the unfamiliar spellings and being willing—especially for the first week or so—to look up some words. A convenient paperback edition of the Tales in Middle English, with glossary, is available in Penguin Classics, edited by Jill Mann. For students reluctant to tackle the Middle English, I recommend interlinear versions, that alternate Chaucer's Middle English and modern English renderings, line by line. A fine interlinear version is available free of charge at a Harvard University website: http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/chaucer. Or else just type Harvard and Chaucer into a search engine and the site will come up.

FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSION:

Chaucer was a “man in the middle,” in the sense that his social position placed him exactly between the aristocracy on one hand and the merchant middle classes on the other. How is this kind of social ambivalence expressed in the social and stylistic latitude of Chaucer’s poetry?

Being a king seems like a very unitary occupation, but Richard seems to have felt the need for a faction or “party,” with strategically placed people working to secure his policies. Does the “commonwealth” of Canterbury Pilgrims show any signs of factional or politically fragmented behavior, either in its members’ behavior or in the kinds of tales they choose to tell?

One of this book’s suggestions is that until late in his career Chaucer expected to perform his poems aloud for a friendly audience. What difference does oral performance (as opposed to private reading) make? Students might be encouraged to think about other poetic forms that rely on an idea of live performance. Rap poetry is probably the most suggestive contemporary instance.

Because Chaucer the Pilgrim pretends to a kind of innocence, people used to make the mistake of supposing Chaucer himself to be an innocent of some sort. How does knowledge of his life history assist in the modification of this view?
Chaucer seems to have mixed religious and worldly perspectives in his own life, living within the sound of monastery bells and working with cynical businessmen. How many of his Pilgrims express a similarly mixed attitude toward religion and daily life?

In a “Retraction” added to the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer expresses considerable regret for his sinfulness in writing some of the more frivolous ones. Is this a temporary attitude, perhaps brought on by his own sober thoughts after composing the “Parson’s Tale,” or does it express a more abiding world view?

In his actual life Chaucer knew some strong and effective, but also controversial, women, such as his sister-in-law Katherine Swynford. The women in his *Canterbury Tales* vary according to the kinds of roles their stories require of them and may be drawn as much from literature as life, but does Chaucer at the end of it all have a “balanced” attitude toward women?

A recent Shakespeare biographer looks at the Macbeths and other theatrical marriages in trying to assess the Shakespeareans’ married life. But couldn’t an author, at least theoretically, say terrible things about the institution, but still enjoy a satisfying marital relation?

*Chaucer’s Tale* suggests that Chaucer collaborated with some rather unsavory characters, but that his motive was less to make money on his own behalf than simply to stay afloat and get his writing done. Can one argue that, for a writer, getting the writing done is a crucial ethical objective in its own right?

Most people thought that Chaucer invented his Pilgrims and then gave them tales to tell . . . others argue that the tales came first and then he invented Pilgrims to tell them. Does it matter?