

The Reading Guide

Reading Group Questions

1. Forgiveness is a recurrent theme in the novel; Claudine forgives Bob for his infidelity and Violet forgives her parents for their treatment of her. Do you think that Claudine and Violet forgive too easily?
2. 'I know I can never measure up to your dad, Claudine. I've always known it.' Do you think that Bob's statement is true? How did Claudine's relationship with her father shape her relationship with Bob?
3. Claudine and Bob agree to keep it a secret that they are searching for Violet's daughter. For a while they also keep the knowledge that they've found Violet from Coley. Do you think that they were / are right to do so in both instances? Is it ever right to keep a secret?
4. On p.473 Claudine observes that Violet and Coley 'had only a year together, less if her months of illness are subtracted, but it was a full and joyful time, and if death could be said to be happy, she had a happy death, as did he'. Could the rewards of finally being together again ever compensate for the years that they had lost?
5. Do you think that Claudine feels guilt about the way she treated Pamela? Was Claudine right to take Pamela to court for a greater share of her father's estate?
6. Was Eva right to abandon her children given the circumstances?
7. Has our society changed so much that locking a young woman away would now be inconceivable?
8. Do you think that Violet's parents ultimately regretted their decision to lock her away?

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About the Book

An evocative and dramatic novel told in the voices of two narrators, in two very different times...

In 1944 Violet is imprisoned in the tower of a rambling country house by her family, her young innocent love for a local lad gone horribly wrong.

60 years later, Claudine is the property negotiator involved in handling the sale of the now derelict Whitecliff, imprisoned herself in a marriage she rushed into after her father's death. She is at a turning point in her life when she starts to find out the truth of Violet's story.

Is happiness ever possible for these two women in their separate and very different worlds?

Interview with the Author

Was your childhood ambition always to be a writer?

No! Until I was almost in my teens, my ambitions were divided, either to be a ballerina, or (never having ridden a horse) Ireland's first professional female jockey. I did study ballet, but my toes are double-jointed and I had quite a bit of difficulty en pointe. I couldn't stick the pain and so ditched that idea. Where the jockey ambition is concerned, from an early age I fashioned makeshift saddles, stirrups and reins from rugs, cardboard and thick string. I would fix this across the armrests of chairs and hone my riding skills. I even became adept at the rising trot.

What inspired you to start writing?

In retrospect, what inspired me to start writing was probably all the reading I did. I could read well from the age of four, and from then on, was never without a library book. I read indiscriminately and became well known in my local library.

How long have you been writing?

I was a late starter. I have been writing fiction only since 1990, when I was 45 years of age. Before that, apart from school essays, I had never written even a short story. Not even an adolescent poem. I came to fiction from journalism – but again, I only began written journalism when I was well into my thirties.

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What do you enjoy most about writing?

I don't want to be facetious about this, and I suppose I should say something profound about personal satisfaction, but writing novels is now my job. It's my way of paying the bills, it's what gets me up in the morning to go to work. I am always striving for the (rare) occasions when a particular scene feels so 'right' that it seems to write itself. This is the apogee. Yet I suppose, in common with other writers, most of the creative satisfaction comes with feeling that I have done the best I can, within the time allowed, for my characters – and the hope that the latest novel is my best so far. Yet I am never fully satisfied. To me, novels are always a work in progress and can be worked on into infinity. I think this is why publishers insist on giving deadlines: if they didn't, speaking for myself, a novel would never be finished. When I talk to my colleagues, I find that many of them feel the same.

Which writers do you admire?

I admire all novelists, really. It is not until you try to write a novel that you realise how tough and draining the work is. I believe there is an impression out there (I come across it during the question and answer sessions at public appearances) that there are certain rules and formulae to writing a novel; that if only you could crack the code, you could be published and become a millionaire. This is not the case, I'm afraid. With regard to favourites, one of the joys of reading is that the list expands with the discovery of authors I have not read before. I was late discovering Anne Tyler, Jonathan Raban and Thomas McGuane. I also love Barbara Kingsolver, Alice Hoffman and Margaret Atwood. Although frequently asked by newspaper reporters to nominate my favourite book of all time, this changes with mood and experience (although *Wuthering Heights*, which plays a part in *Tell Me Your Secret* would be way up there. If I could choose an author, rather than a single volume, it would have to be the novels of Thomas Hardy.

Which authors have influenced you the most and why?

I would really love to answer this question honestly, but I can't. I know that at school, I was the bane of my English teacher's life because my essays always reflected the style of the last book I read: Thomas Hardy, Annie M. P. Smithson, P.G. Wodehouse, even James Joyce!

What was the last good book you read?

The Two of Us: My Life with John Thaw, Sheila Hancock's superb "double memoir" of her life with the late actor.

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How far has your life experience influenced your writing?

Considerably. There is not an author alive to whom this does not apply. We try to believe otherwise – and imagination does play the dominant role – but what we have seen, heard and suffered within our own lives is certainly part of our characters' psyches.

Do you always know how your books will end before you start writing?

Never. I start my books with a single image or phrase that has entered my brain and seized hold of it. Sometimes this image or phrase seems totally irrelevant until I sit down and discover what it is about. And sometimes the beginning ends up at the end. For me (excuse the cliché), writing fiction is a process of continual discovery.

What inspired TELL ME YOUR SECRET?

Again it was an image. Somewhere in the distant past, someone had told me a true story about a young girl imprisoned by her family. I have long ago forgotten who told me – and even the details of what happened to the girl. But that central image, of the imprisonment, stuck with me and wouldn't let go of its grasp on my brain until I sat down to examine it.

How is this novel different from the previous one?

It is actually linked to the previous one, *Children of Eve*, but because the characters and locations are absolutely different, the novel is different too; the voices of the characters are their own; and I hope (again) that I am continuing to develop as a novelist.

What kind of audience is TELL ME YOUR SECRET aimed at?

I wish I knew! I don't aim at any particular audience other than readers who like to become engrossed in a good story and to keep them reading in order to find out what happens next. I know that in a market flooded with fiction, publishers, reviewers and booksellers have to pigeonhole novels in 'genres' in order to give guidance and keep order, but every time I am asked to describe my own niche, I am genuinely stuck for an answer. I would like *Tell Me Your Secret* to be regarded as a big, old-fashioned, engrossing story, told well. I would love a reader to feel satisfied having finished it, but also to murmur on closing its covers: 'Damn! I wish that wasn't the end.'