

## The Reading Guide

---

### Reading Group Questions

1. With the action moving from the Waldorf-Astoria to Chinatown, from Gramercy Park to the Manhattan Bridge, the New York backdrop plays an integral role in this novel. Do you think the author has captured the city during this period well?
2. Over the course of the book, the author uses several red herrings to throw readers off the scent. Can you identify them? Did you feel they enhanced your reading experience?
3. We're presented with a lot of information about psychoanalysis and Freudian theory. How does the author weave it into the plot and make it engaging?
4. The story contains a fairly radical interpretation of Hamlet. What does this add to the story?
5. How does the relationship between Freud and Younger develop over the course of the book? What does this add to our understanding of the characters?
6. We frequently see Freud and his group debating matters of psychoanalysis, with Jung often disagreeing with the others. What impact does this divergence in opinion have on the group, and how does it contribute to the tension in the novel?
7. Littlemore's cheerful, down-to-earth nature sets him apart from most of the other characters. What does his character bring to the novel?
8. How does the author knit the various strands of the story together at the end of the novel to create impact?
9. Were you surprised by the ending?
10. What other books would you recommend to other readers who have enjoyed this one?

### Further Reading

Hamlet, William Shakespeare  
 Washington Square, Henry James  
 The House of Mirth, Edith Wharton  
 The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes, Arthur Conan Doyle  
 'Under the Knife' by H. G. Wells, in The Complete Short Stories of H. G. Wells,  
 or The Plattner Story and Others

## The Reading Guide

---

Ragtime, E. L. Doctorow

The Alienist, Caleb Carr

As Freud aficionados will have instantly recognized, Nora is based on Dora, the young woman described in Freud's most controversial case history. Her story is published as 'A Case of Hysteria' in Volume 7 of The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, or as a short stand-alone paperback, *Dora - An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. Interested readers would find *Dora's Case*, a collection of essays edited by C. Bernheimer and C. Kahane, particularly illuminating. The biography I would recommend is *Freud: A Life for Our Time* by Peter Gay.

## About the Book

The Interpretation of Murder is an intricately plotted literary thriller based on true events - the story of Sigmund Freud's 1909 visit to New York. Around this kernel of fact, Jed Rubenfeld has spun a spectacularly entertaining fiction centred upon murder: a wealthy young debutante is discovered bound, whipped and strangled in her penthouse apartment, high above Broadway. The following night Nora Acton, another society beauty, narrowly escapes the same fate and the mayor of New York calls upon Freud to use his revolutionary ideas to help Nora recover her memory and solve the crime. But nothing about the attacks - or indeed about Nora - is quite as it seems.

As fiendishly ingenious a thriller as you could hope to read, The Interpretation of Murder cuts to the heart of what it is that makes Freud's ideas so fascinating and hugely engaging. It's also the ultimate New York story: the construction of the skyscrapers, glittering high society salons, Chinatown opium dens, brothels and asylums, all have their part to play in Jed Rubenfeld's dazzling vision of Manhattan. A compelling tour through the dark places of a city, and of the human mind, The Interpretation of Murder is a storytelling triumph, and marks the debut of a major new talent.

## Reviews

'What a spectacular debut. fiendishly clever. a fascinating recreation of a golden age in which much of the New York of today is recognisable' **Guardian**

'A thrilling, heart-in-the-mouth read. Once you start reading, it's impossible to put down' **Scotsman**

'Rubenfeld's portrayal of New York's social divisions, its louche, rumbustious energy, and its skyscrapers reaching higher and higher, have a vivid authenticity. He's adept at weaving real-life famous and notorious characters of the city with his invented cast.

## The Reading Guide

---

The result is an unusually intelligent novel which entertains, informs and intrigues on several levels' *The Times*

'Rubenfeld writes beautifully. an intriguing mystery' *Sunday Telegraph*

'Rubenfeld's brilliant conceit is to weave this real-life event into an accomplished thriller. a dazzling novel' *Independent*

## An Interview with the Author

**1. How do you think the presence of real-life figures, people whom readers will recognize and have associations with, makes a novel different from one in which all the characters and scenarios are wholly invented? Are there different methods of storytelling involved?**

Historical novels are different. There are different expectations on the readers' part and different obligations on the author's.

The main thing is that readers of historical novels nowadays aren't content merely to be entertained by a good, inventive story. They want to be educated too. In a way that's a strange combination, and it creates a tricky task for the author, who has simultaneously to write fact and fiction. On the one hand, the facts can't get in the way of the fiction; on the other, the fiction can't lie about the facts. My solution was in part to write an "Author's Note," explaining the main lines of division between reality and imagination in *The Interpretation of Murder*.

But for me it was probably easier to write a historical novel. The canvas was half-painted before I began. And the real New York City of 1909 was far more interesting than anything I could have imagined. The same was true of Freud's Dora case and Freud's relationship with Jung.

**2. Some of the real-life characters in the novel, like Chong Sing, Leon Ling and Elsie Sigel, are not famous at all. How did you come across some of these more obscure historical elements in the novel? Did you read newspapers from the period?**

I read thousands of old newspaper articles, and that's how, totally by chance, I came across the astonishing story of Elsie Sigel, with its scandalous trappings of miscegenation and murder, which stunned New York City in the summer of 1909 and led to an international manhunt for Leon Ling. But Elsie and Leon are not the only "obscure" real-life people in the book. The more I studied the period - and I can't tell you how hard everybody worked to make *The Interpretation of Murder* historically

## The Reading Guide

---

accurate - the more I became fascinated by the "minor" or "insignificant" historical figures, every one of whom, it seemed, had his or her own extraordinary story. For example, the corrupt Sergeant Charles Becker (whom the reader meets in the Jefferson Market jail) is real, as are his cronies Jacob "Whitey" Seidenshner, "Dago Frank" Cirofici, "Lefty Louie" Rosenberg, and Harry "Gyp the Blood" Horowitz. All five men would be dead by 1915 - electrocuted at Sing Sing. Another example: the book mentions a young woman patient seen by Jung and a startling letter sent by Jung to the patient's mother. All of that is real. Every grand personage at Aunt Mamie's ball is real, and when I mention that James Roosevelt Roosevelt married a prostitute, or that John Jacob Astor took up with a girl of sixteen, readers can be sure that such details are based on fact. Susie Merrill is real. Even the baby Susie sends away to another family is real.

### **3. How do Younger's and Freud's theories about Hamlet square with your own? Do you find one or the other of them more credible?**

I'll never be able to accept Freud's Oedipal interpretation of Hamlet. But then I don't accept Freud's Oedipal interpretation of Oedipus. Personally, I find Younger's theory of Hamlet quite interesting.

### **4. Was there a particular element of the story that you came up with first, one aspect or character around which you built the rest of the story? Is there one character you related to more than others?**

I began with the real-life mystery surrounding Freud's visit to America. Given how successful his visit was by all objective measures, why did Freud speak of this trip later in life as if it had scarred him? Why did he call Americans savages and criminals? What if (I asked myself) we imagined some extraordinary episode taking place during Freud's week in Manhattan that could explain his reaction? What if Freud got involved in a case - where "case" meant simultaneously a psychoanalytic case and a murder case?

That's how the book started. The "case," I quickly realized, should be an actual Freudian case history, transplanted to America. Too many books and movies with fictionalized psychoanalyses turn psychoanalysis into a caricature; I wanted something much closer to the real thing. That's how I came to Dora, who becomes Nora in my book.

But I also realized I didn't want Freud himself to be the protagonist. I wanted an American protagonist, a young American doctor who finds Freud's ideas compelling but at the same time resists them, struggles with them, refuses to accept them as orthodoxy, as Freud's other followers did. Hence Younger. Then I saw that Younger and Nora would have to fall in love. Everything else was built up around these elements.

The Reading Guide

---

And yes, of course, it's Younger whom, psychologically, I'm most like.

**5. In addition to the research you've done for this book, the story also covers territory that you'd studied in college and graduate school: Freud as an undergraduate, and Shakespeare at Juilliard. Are there some parts of the novel for which you drew more on your early experience than on your more recent research, areas where your own unconscious was driving the storytelling more than others?**

I was lucky: going into *The Interpretation of Murder*, I already had a lot of knowledge about Freud and Shakespeare that I could bring to the book. If I've managed to bring a realistic Freud to life, it's because of years of studying his life and work beforehand.

What role did my unconscious play in *The Interpretation of Murder*? Absolutely none. I have no unconscious - at least not that I'm aware of.

No, seriously, every novel is in part an autobiography written in code. Perhaps you're asking me to reveal my code. The author, however, often doesn't know his own code. And even if I did, I'm not telling.

**6. The crimes in this novel are seen through the eyes of Sigmund Freud and several other psychotherapists. How do you think the presence of psychotherapists at the center of the story changes the treatment of good vs. evil that often drives crime novels?**

Certainly there can be no good or evil without free will, and it is true that modern psychology has often been an enemy of free will. Freud himself questioned what he called "the feeling of free will." An example he liked to use was his choice of the name "Dora" when writing the case history on which Nora in *The Interpretation of Murder* is based. Freud thought he had chosen "Dora" freely, but through analysis he became convinced that this "choice" was strictly determined by his unconscious (Dora happened to be a name intimately connected to one of his sisters). Freud believed that our "freely made decisions" are usually like that: determined by deep psychological drives or wishes we can't control and aren't even aware of. So it's no surprise that Freud once referred to the "myth of good and evil."

But there is no such "myth" in my book. In *The Interpretation of Murder*, good and evil are real. There are old-fashioned good guys and bad guys, doing good things and bad. Freud was right, of course: we all have dark needs, fears and desires, originating in childhood or perhaps even before. But in my book, these things are never excuses. I guess I'm old school that way.

## The Reading Guide

---

The worst people, however, may not be the ones who commit the worst crimes. The worst character in Interpretation may be Nora's mother, Mrs. Mildred Acton, who does no violence at all.

**7. Late in the novel, Younger arrives at a conclusion about the significance of the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy. Did you invent this theory for the purposes of the book, or is it taken from another text? Do you subscribe to any of the interpretations put forth in the book?**

Younger's interpretation of "To be, or not to be" is not taken from any other text. So far as I know, it is his original idea. But I'm hardly an expert; for all I know, someone may have said the very same thing two centuries ago. Probably his heirs are even now planning their plagiarism lawsuit.

**8. Are you a fan of crime fiction and thrillers? Are there particular novels that informed your approach to this story, its structure or its main themes, or did you refer more to other kinds of fiction as models for the story?**

If you had asked me in my teens who my favorite author was, I might have answered Arthur Conan Doyle (I read all the Sherlock Holmes stories as a boy and read many of them again recently to my daughters). In my twenties, I would have answered Henry James. Both were in my mind when I wrote The Interpretation of Murder.

Of course, in terms of the book's plot, my largest debt is due to Freud's Dora essay, which actually reads more like a novel than a psychiatric case history.

For literary renditions of 1909 Manhattan, I drew not only on James, but also on Edith Wharton and E.L. Doctorow. Within the genre of historical crime novel, I thought Matthew Pearl's The Dante Club was a terrific read. In attempting period dialogue, I tried to take inspiration from Patrick O'Brian's seafaring novels (I believe I have read them all).

**9. How did you go about your research for the novel? Did you map out the entire story before beginning the research, or did you learn things along the way about Freud, Jung, or New York history that changed the direction of the story?**

I'm one of those writers who has to have the entire story in his head - beginning, middle and end - before writing the first sentence. So I did map out the story in considerable detail in advance. But it turned out I was fooling myself. The story changed - repeatedly. And it wasn't the subsequent research that changed it. It was the development of the characters, who suddenly refused to go along with what I had planned for them. This was very annoying and required a lot of arduous reworking.

The Reading Guide

---

**10. What's your opinion about the relevance of Freudian psychology today? Have your ideas about this changed since you studied psychology in school? Did they change in the course of your research for the book?**

There was a period twenty or twenty-five years ago when Freud was really in the wilderness - spurned as a sexist, rendered obsolete in the eyes of the psychopharmacologists, and even accused (wildly) of suppressing the truth about child abuse. Today he might be enjoying a renaissance. But Freud's relevance within the scientific psychiatric community today is almost trivial compared to what it once was. Many - perhaps most - scientifically minded psychiatrists today ignore Freud. They seem to have very little time or respect for him. If, however, we stop and consider the man's impact on modern culture, there is genuine cause for astonishment.

Nearly everyone now acknowledges the existence and importance of unconscious thoughts and feelings. Many people think that the hidden truths of sexuality are central to understanding who we really are. Millions and millions of people have been in psychotherapy or know others who have. All this can be traced, at least in significant part, to Sigmund Freud. It was Freud who offered the first systematic psychology of the unconscious. It was Freud who put sexuality at the epicenter of modern psychology. And it was Freud who, along with his early collaborator Breuer, essentially created psychotherapy. If it's an exaggeration, it's only a slight one to say that Freud was one of the two or three most influential minds of the entire twentieth century.

**11. A production company has licensed film rights to the novel. Are you interested in how the book might be translated to film? Do you have any ideas about who might be cast in the major roles, or who might direct?**

I would be thrilled if Warner Brothers makes *The Interpretation of Murder* into a film. More than that, my daughters would be thrilled - particularly because I insisted before selling the movie rights that the girls would get to be in a crowd scene, if there are any crowd scenes. But I know nothing right now about casting or directing. That's all a long way off - if indeed it ever happens.

### About the author

Currently the Robert R. Slaughter Professor of Law at Yale University, Jed Rubenfeld has been described as 'one of the most elegant legal writers of his generation'.

As a Princeton undergraduate, he wrote his senior thesis on Freud. At the Juilliard School of Drama, he studied Shakespeare. He lives in New Haven, Connecticut, with his wife and two daughters. *The Interpretation of Murder* is his first novel.