

## The Reading Guide

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### Reading Group Questions

1. When Iris gets the call from the psychiatric hospital, she is put in a very difficult position. What does she stand to gain and lose from the decision she eventually makes? What would you do in her shoes?
2. How have years of incarceration affected Esme? Has she retained any of the qualities we see in young Esme, before she is committed? Does she seem sane to you?
3. The story contains several twists – what are they, and which did you find the most shocking?
4. Considering all that Kitty has done, all that has happened to her, and the dementia she has suffered in old age, are you able to feel sympathetic towards her?
5. The relationship between Iris and Alex is a complex one. How does it seem to have influenced their relationships with others? By the end of the novel, do you think they had reached any kind of resolution?
6. How did you find the end of the book? Can you think of any alternative endings that might have worked?
7. What similarities, and what differences do you see between the younger Esme, and the younger Iris?
8. This is a novel with a very complex time scheme. What techniques does the author use to handle this?
9. This has been described as Maggie O'Farrell's best novel so far. Do you agree?
10. The relationship between the sisters is very complicated. In what ways does it change as they enter adulthood?
11. How do you think people's attitudes towards unmarried mothers have changed since Esme was a young girl? How different would her life have been had she been able to keep her baby?
12. What do you feel the book tells us about mental institutions? Do you think people's attitudes have changed since the first half of the 20th Century?

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### Suggested further reading:

The Yellow Wallpaper - Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Jane Eyre - Charlotte Bronte

The Wide Sargasso Sea - Jean Rhys

The Bell Jar - Sylvia Plath

Hallucinating Foucault - Patricia Duncker

Flesh and Blood - Michèle Roberts

The Woman in White - Wilkie Collins

Rebecca - Daphne du Maurier

The House of Mirth - Edith Wharton

Good Behaviour – Molly Keane

Vanity Fair – William Thackeray

### About the Book

Set between the 1930s, and the present, Maggie O'Farrell's novel is the story of Esme, a woman edited out of her family's history, and of the secrets that come to light when, sixty years later, she is released from care, and a young woman, Iris, discovers the great aunt she never knew she had. The mystery that unfolds is the heartbreaking tale of two sisters in colonial India and 1930s Edinburgh - of the loneliness that binds them together and the rivalries that drive them apart, and lead one of them to a shocking betrayal - but above all it is the story of Esme, a fiercely intelligent, unconventional young woman, and of the terrible price she is made to pay for her family's unhappiness.

### About the author

Maggie O'Farrell was born in Northern Ireland in 1972, and grew up in Wales and Scotland. She now lives in Edinburgh with her family. Her debut novel, AFTER YOU'D GONE, was published to international acclaim, and won a Betty Trask Award, while her third, THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US, won the 2005 Somerset Maugham Award.