

Discussion Guide

1. How did the opening lines of the prologue set the tone for the rest of the novel? When you finally read the moment it depicted, did the impact of that scene change for you?
2. The setting for Madam and Caldonbrae Hall are rocky Scottish cliffs. How does this isolated coast serve the narrative? Do you think the book would be the same or different without it? Why or why not?
3. Discuss the structure of the novel. The sections are broken down by term, the interstitials of Greek and Roman mythology. How does this structure work to serve and progress the narrative?
4. On page 30, Nessa asks Rose, “Then why have they sent you to teach us?” After finishing the novel, does that question carry a different weight to you than when you first read it?
5. Rose teaches her students Latin through the translation of Greek and Roman stories about empowered women. Though these stories are usually tragedies, the Fourths take much interest in them. Why do you think these particular stories in mythology resonate with the young women, even though they typically result in the heroine’s death?
6. Rose teaches her students about Daphne, who wished to remain a virgin, young and free, only to be turned into a rooted tree and touched by Apollo whenever he chose. In what ways can this mythology be an allusion to the experiences of the young women at Caldonbrae Hall?
7. In continuing with question 6, Rose teaches her students about Antigone, who, as a young woman, broke the patriarchal rules of her uncle to fight for what she believed in and won. How is this mythology an allusion to the actions of Freddie, Nessa, and Daisy?
8. Multiple women are living at Caldonbrae Hall during different phases of their lives. Characters such as Bethany, Freddie, Clarissa, Frances, and Vivien accept the practices of the institution and the dominance of the patriarchy. Why do you think these specific characters, in all of their differences, are so central to the novel?

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9. What is the significance of the ceramic owl in Rose's classroom? What do you think it means that Josie was the one manipulating its position until she finally breaks it?
10. There are very few young men at Caldonbrae Hall. What do you think the addition of a character like Anthony, a man who is not behind the scenes, adds to the novel's commentary on Caldonbrae Hall's beliefs and practices regarding women?
11. Discuss the use of the color red in the novel. Worship classes take place in a red room with red cushions. Rose wears a red dress and has red nails at the ball. The fire in the staff common room burns red. Do you think there is any significance to this? What are some other motifs that appear throughout the novel?
12. Although Rose's relationship with her mother is strained, she appreciates her for the feminist that she was. Why do you think their relationship is such a source of pain for Rose? What do you think this drives her toward instead? Do you think they could have ended up in a better place if she had a chance to speak with her after the fire?
13. How did the end of the novel make you feel? Did you sense that the novel was leading up to this point? In the epilogue, did where the characters ended up align with what you had imagined for them?
14. The gothic genre dictates that a vulnerable young woman must confront an enemy who is typically male. It usually takes place in a large house, and the young woman overcomes this enemy and his evil. How far, and in what ways, do you think Madam fits or doesn't fit the gothic genre?
15. In your opinion, what is the real gift that Rose gives to the three girls? Is it education, inspiration, or agency to follow their instincts/desires? Whose "fault" is the fire, then? Do you think Rose is a good teacher?

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