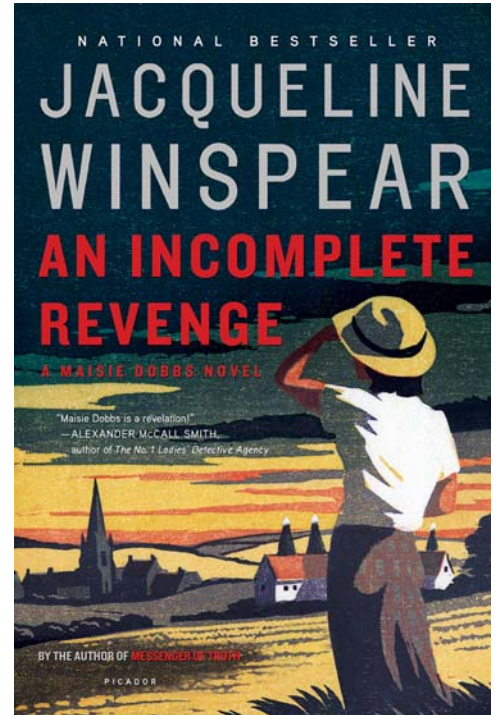


# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *An Incomplete Revenge* *A Novel*

*by Jacqueline Winspear*

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### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *An Incomplete Revenge* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *An Incomplete Revenge*.

### About the Book

As autumn descends on England in 1931, the harvest season finds a strange assortment of people on the move. For working-class Londoners like detective Maisie Dobbs's assistant, Billy Beale, it is time for an annual trek to Kent to earn a few quid hop-picking. The ripened hops also attract a band of gypsies, eager to support themselves by working the fields. Yet as Londoners and gypsies alike settle in for a few weeks of toil, there are forces at work that will prove anything but settling.

At the outset of *An Incomplete Revenge*, the fifth and latest novel in Jacqueline Winspear's award-winning Maisie Dobbs mystery series, Maisie's old friend James Compton makes plans to

purchase an estate in the same vicinity as the hops gardens. Having heard of a series of petty crimes and suspicious fires in the area, he engages Maisie to investigate. Although Maisie's experience has taught her that the most routine cases can conceal astonishing truths, nothing could prepare her for what awaits under the Kentish harvest moon. In the village of Heronsdene, where Maisie takes a room, the townspeople are closely knit to a disturbing degree. Haunted by the memory of a Zeppelin attack during the Great War, they evade discussions of the past and appear to be descending ever deeper into a web of lies that while it holds them together, also binds them to a poisonous legacy of suspicion and fear.

In addition to dealing with the oddly reticent townfolk, Maisie must contend with a host groups and individuals steeped in class and ethnic prejudice. The citizens of Heronsdene reflexively blame the visiting Londoners for the theft and vandalism that plague the town. At the same time, the Londoners literally turn their backs on the gypsies, who in turn maintain their own distrustful distance from everyone else. Meanwhile, the children of Maisie's friend Priscilla Evernden fight lonely battle against schoolmates who deride their foreign accents and manners. And above the scene sits perhaps the most threatening figure of all: a powerful but morally bankrupt aristocrat named Alfred Sandermere who looks out from his manor house in all directions with condescension and contempt.

A novel that deftly mingles intriguing mystery with keen social insight, *An Incomplete Revenge* is forged in fire. While Winspear's characters struggle to keep their smoldering emotions out of view, the seemingly peaceable landscape of Kent is continually seared by actual flames. Until the novel's final pages, it remains unclear whether these fires will ultimately serve to purify or to destroy. In *An Incomplete Revenge*, Winspear achieves a new level of complexity and vision. This is a book to be treasures, not only for its riveting story but also for lessons it can teach us about life in a world where forces of light and dark so endlessly collide.

## About the Author

Born and raised in the county of Kent, England, Jacqueline Winspear worked in academic publishing, higher education, and marketing communications before immigrating to the United States in 1990. She now lives in California but remains a frequent visitor to Europe and the United Kingdom. Her debut novel, *Maisie Dobbs*, was honored with the Agatha, Alex and Macavity awards. Winspear recently registered an enviable grand slam when *Messenger of Truth*, the fourth novel in her series of Maisie Dobbs mysteries, also became the fourth in the series to be nominated for the prestigious Agatha Award for Best Novel. *An Incomplete Revenge* is the fifth Maisie Dobbs novel.

## Discussion Questions

1. Divided between past and present, between her female gender and her male-dominated profession, and between her British identity and part-gypsy ancestry, Maisie Dobbs is a character of intense inward divisions. How do these divisions both complicate and strengthen Maisie as a character?

2. A variety of pivotal scenes in *An Incomplete Revenge* involve dramatic use of fire. What range of moods, feelings, or symbolic meanings does fire represent in the novel?
3. Although several of the residents of Heronsdene are developed individually as characters, the townspeople are also dominated by an ominous group psychology. What might Winspear be suggesting through her portrayal of this town about the limits of people's abilities to think or choose for themselves?
4. Maisie is freer from class prejudice than most of the other character in Winspear's novel. Nevertheless, does an awareness of class difference influence her relationships with people like Billy Beale and Priscilla Evernden? How?
5. Animals, especially dogs and horses, appear prominently in *An Incomplete Revenge*. How does their presence and the way they are treated help us to better understand Winspear's human characters?
6. Followers of the Maisie Dobbs series have shared the heroine's dread anticipation of the death of her long-incapacitated friend Simon Lynch. Does his death in *An Incomplete Revenge* affect Maisie (or you) in the ways that you anticipated? What choices does Winspear make in describing Maisie's emotional response and do you agree with them?
7. A character from a previous Maisie Dobbs mystery observed that war is despicable because it is "not over when it ends." How might this seeming paradox be applied to *An Incomplete Revenge*? Through the death of Simon Lynch and the group confession that marks a climax in the novel, do you think Maisie and the townspeople of Heronsdene are moving toward a long-awaited closure, or do you think they will continue to be trapped and haunted by the memories of the Great War? On what do you base your judgment?
8. What is Maisie's attitude toward the gypsy elements in her ancestry? In a novel that counsels the acceptance and understanding of different ethnicities, is Maisie sufficiently accepting of her own mixed heritage?
9. At the end of the novel, Maisie dances alone in her apartment. Discuss the significance of this gesture.

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