



# Reading Group Gold

## What Was She Thinking

by Zoë Heller

“Equally adroit at satire and at psychological suspense, Heller charts the course of a predatory friendship and demonstrates the lengths to which some people go for human company.” —*The New Yorker*

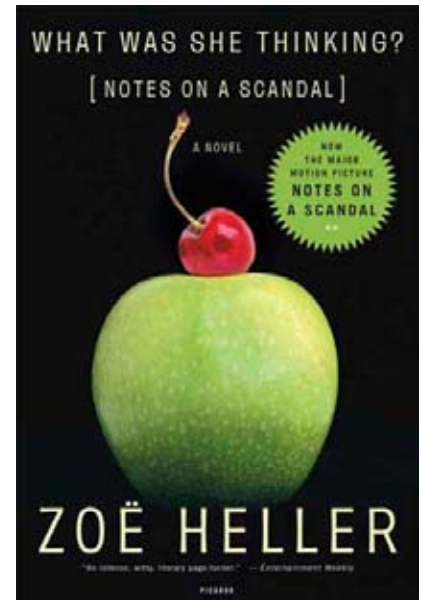
### Reader’s Guide Synopsis

*What Was She Thinking?* is the story of a scandalous relationship between Sheba Hart, the new pottery teacher at St. George’s, and her fifteen-year-old student, and its aftermath. The novel is narrated by Barbara Covett, an older teacher who lives alone with her cat, and sees in Sheba the possibility of companionship. Barbara’s repressed and solitary existence contrasts sharply with Sheba’s chaotic life of privilege and marriage, the difficulties raising a sullen adolescent daughter and a disabled son. The disastrous results of the affair provide a way for Barbara to become indispensable to Sheba, and their friendship begins to develop. By turns poignant and satirical, *What Was She Thinking?* explores love, passion, envy, loneliness, and friendship from every angle to create a vivid psychological portrait of characters caught between circumstance and manipulation.

Zoë Heller was born in London. Her work as a feature writer, critic, and columnist has appeared in *The Independent on Sunday*, *The London Sunday Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, *The London Review of Books*, *Esquire*, *The New Republic*, and *The Times Literary Supplement*. She currently writes a weekly column for the *London Telegraph*, for which she won the 2002 British Press Award for Columnist of the Year. She has lived in New York since 1993.

### Discussion

1. There has traditionally been a taboo on older women/younger men relationships. In the novel, the news media describes the affair between Sheba and Connolly as “despicable” and “unhealthy.” Why do you think it has historically been viewed this way? Do you agree?
2. Heller expertly captures the insulating and sometimes claustrophobic atmosphere of academia. Give examples of this, and discuss the differences and similarities between Sheba and Barbara that brought them to teach at the same institution.
3. Connolly’s unabashed admiration and innocence prove irresistible to Sheba. How are Connolly’s attentions much different from the ogles of her academic colleagues since both indicate that they find her sexu-



ISBN: 978-0-312-42199-1 | 2004



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ally attractive? Why is one so much more flattering?

4. What makes a woman like Sheba behave so irresponsibly? How easy was it for her to risk everything for the danger of the relationship? Does Sheba really think about the consequences of her actions?

5. Why does Sheba's friendship with Sue Hodges seem so ill-founded to Barbara? Why would Sheba choose Sue as her confidant— she never mentions Connolly's visits to Sue. How does Barbara seduce Sheba away from Sue?

6. Barbara observes that Connolly's overt effort to please Sheba is like 'the cynicism of all courtship.' Discuss what she means by this.

7. Barbara asks why Sheba insists on seeing Connolly as gifted and extraordinary in a sea of fairly ordinary, untalented students. Does the element of class exacerbate the forbidden nature of the relationship? Is Connolly exploiting this? What is his culpability in the situation?

8. Why, when Barbara seems like such a prim and formal person, is she initially so sympathetic to Sheba's predicament? Why is she not appalled? She says she thinks that Connolly is actually benefiting from the relationship, not being abused by it. Is it her desire for Sheba's friendship or pure feminist support? Does she take vicarious pleasure in it?

9. What is Barbara's reaction when she finally finds out about the affair? Is this the cause of her betrayal? Does it lead to her punishment at St. George's? Does Barbara have the right to set down the events in writing? Discuss how their friendship provides as fertile ground for mutual misunderstanding, jealousy, and treachery as does the illicit love affair.

10. The story is finally about the two women, and the many facets of female friendship. Discuss the ways in which Heller's device of having Barbara tell the story serves to enrich the novel by revealing both women's emotional lives.

## Praise for *What Was She Thinking?*

"Heller elevates a tabloid-worthy tale of obsession into an intense, witty, literary page-turner...." —Nancy Miller, *Entertainment Weekly*

"A tartly readable portrait of terminal neediness, as sharp and merciless as any of Zoë Heller's columns." —Heller McAlpin, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

"Darkly comic...In the end, *What Was She Thinking?* isn't so much about the standard student-teacher affair as it is about the complicated weights and balances of female friendships...." —Lisa Zeidner, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Highly addictive...a funny, unnerving, acutely intelligent novel of psychological suspense." —Adam Bogley, *The New York Observer*