

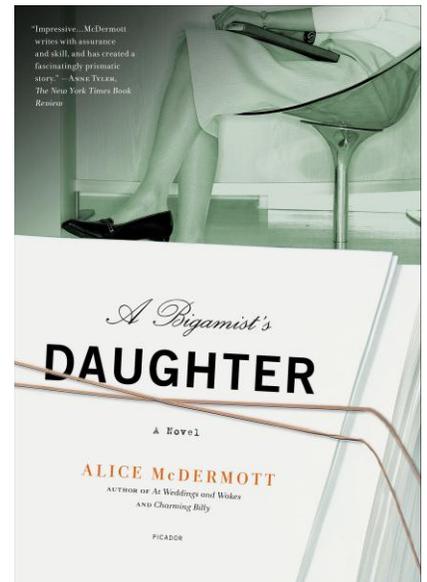
# Reading Group Gold

## A Bigamist's Daughter

by Alice McDermott

Elizabeth Connelly, editor at a New York vanity press, sells the dream of publication (admittedly, to writers of questionable talent). Stories of true emotional depth rarely cross her desk. But when a young writer named Tupper Daniels walks in, bearing an unfinished novel, Elizabeth is drawn to both the novelist and his story—a lyrical tale about a man in love with more than one woman at once. Tupper's manuscript unlocks memories of her own secretive father, who himself may have been a bigamist. As Elizabeth and Tupper search for the perfect dénouement, their affair, too, approaches a most unexpected and poignant coda.

A brilliant debut from one of our most celebrated authors, *A Bigamist's Daughter* is "a wise, sad, witty novel about men and women, God, hope, love, illusion, and fiction itself" (Newsweek).



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### Questions

1. What were your reactions to Tupper's novel, which shapes the opening scenes of **A Bigamist's Daughter**? Would you have bought his book, joining the hordes of readers he confidently predicted would have been intrigued? What was the effect of reading a book whose plot is built around the publishing process itself—albeit a very different form of publishing from the one Alice McDermott experienced?
2. **A Bigamist's Daughter** was originally published in 1982. Has our image of single women changed very much since then? Would Elizabeth's experiences with dating, living alone, and establishing a career remain the same if she were a twenty-first-century character?
3. How would you describe Elizabeth's relationship with her mother? What did her mother teach her about the role of women? What transformations did both women undergo after they began living apart?
4. What is the effect of the novel's shifting points of view? In what way did it enhance the storytelling to use past-tense, first-person narration with the chapters set in Maine, allowing you to hear Elizabeth's voice in those passages, while the rest of the novel unfolded in the present tense, with third-person narration?
5. How do Ward and Tupper compare as romantics? What makes them attractive to the women in their lives? What accounts for the tremendous differences in their approaches to love?

6. What were your initial impressions of Tupper? Did your opinion of him shift throughout the novel? Would you have trusted him and dated him?
7. What does sex mean to Elizabeth? What did she hope to achieve by staying celibate for several months? What determined whether she found a sexual encounter to be fulfilling—emotionally or otherwise?
8. How do Joanne’s attitudes about weddings and marriage compare to yours? What did her upbringing prepare her for in terms of marriage and having a family of her own? Did she have an advantage over Elizabeth? Would you have preferred to live Joanne’s life or Elizabeth’s?
9. To what extent is Elizabeth influenced by her Catholicism and by her Irish ancestry? Does she reject or embrace these legacies? How do these legacies mesh with Tupper’s notions of being a Southern gentleman?
10. How is Elizabeth affected by the fact-finding trip to Long Island? Is Tupper’s approach to finding an ending appropriate? Is the best ending to a novel found in actual events from someone’s past?
11. Discuss your reactions to Tupper’s comments about men and women at the end of Chapter Seventeen: “If a man fails to connect with a certain woman, he just goes on to someone else. But women—and I’m not condoning this, I’m just talking about the way things are—women derive so much more of themselves, their identity, their self-confidence from men.”
12. Which is the greater crime in the novel’s “bigamies”: disloyalty or dishonesty? What lies does Elizabeth tell? Are they harmful? Or are they necessary for her survival?
13. What parallels run between the seductive hope Elizabeth offers to prospective authors and the romantic seductions she experiences in her personal life? In the end, does Elizabeth become like her father?



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