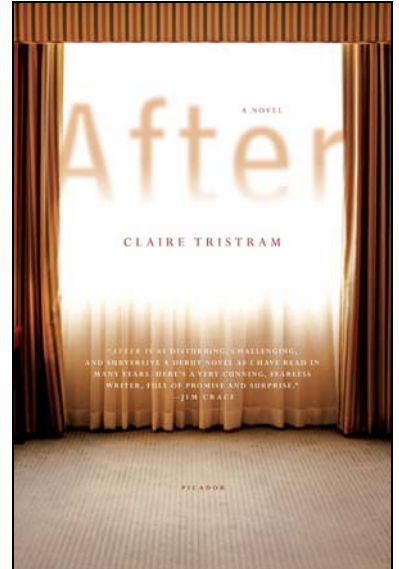


READING GROUP GUIDE

After

by Claire Tristram

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About this Guide

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

About the Book

“After is as disturbing, challenging and subversive a debut novel as I have read in many years. Here's a very cunning, fearless writer, full of promise and surprise.”—Jim Crace

After is the story of an intense affair that takes place over a day and a night. It has been a year since the woman's husband was murdered by Islamic extremists. Now she decides to take a lover, a Muslim man. Telling their story from both points of view, Claire Tristram describes their passion and their tenderness, their shifting desires and hesitations, and the unexpected escalation of their lovemaking into terrifying violence.

“A balanced, taut narrative...truly chilling suspense.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“What emerges are questions of identity and what we think ourselves capable of. What we're left with is the notion that grief and hate can overtake us, no matter who we think we are.”

—*USA Today*

“This taut psychological portrait is timely, dignified and imbued with a profound sense of the erotic.”

—*San Diego Union Tribune*

About the Author

Claire Tristram lives in California and writes frequently about politics, culture, and science. *After* is her first novel.

Discussion Questions

As *After* opens, a grieving woman, known simply as “the widow,” is about to begin an affair with a married Muslim man. The woman wants to move past her grief over losing her husband. The man is seeking to escape the prejudice that plagues him in his daily life. For a day and a night these two lovers embark on a psychological journey from which both emerge profoundly changed

1. Who is the protagonist of *AFTER*, the widow or the Muslim? In what ways does your sympathy evolve for each character as the novel progresses?
2. Both the widow and the Muslim are burdened with the memory of a loved one’s murder. How has the widow’s grief been affected by the way her life has become a media event? How has the Muslim’s grief been affected by the way he keeps his grief to himself? Which character has coped more successfully with grief?
3. *AFTER* takes place in a profoundly altered reality, where credit cards are no longer accepted, where fresh vegetables have become exorbitantly expensive, where gasoline is hoarded, and where people come down with strange rashes, perhaps from biological terror. The widow wants “to bring some semblance of reality to the situation in which she found herself, alone with this man who insisted on being tender, when all the while, underneath, she heard the ugly uncompromising beat of a distant war drum, warning her of some chaos or terror to come.” How does the heightened anxiety with which these characters live drive the action of the novel? How does the novel exploit the reader’s probable anxiety about world events, including future terrorist acts, to give context to this fictional world?
4. What affect does it have that both characters remain unnamed for most of the novel? How would the relationship of the widow and the Muslim change if they were each to refer to one another by their real names? How would the reader’s relationship with these characters be changed if the novel used proper names for the characters in place of “the widow” and “the Muslim?”
5. The widow and the Muslim are joined at dinner by another unmarried, possibly adulterous couple. In what ways is the relationship between the widow and the Muslim altered by their interaction with this other couple?
6. The Muslim implores the widow: “Don’t you think you can also imagine me some other way...as an individual? Not as a particular category? Even for a moment?” The widow replies: “Individuals are all the same, you know. Cut off from who they are. They are nothing at all...You are a Muslim. I am the widow of a Jew. That is who I am.” Is the widow missing an opportunity to grow close to another human being, by insisting on their differences? Or is she just stating the truth of things? Is the Muslim’s request naive, or an honest attempt to become closer?
7. Why does Changiz agree to the widow’s sadism? Is he making a free choice? Or is he an unwitting victim? Does he feel guilt? Is this his penance? At some point in the action, do your answers change? How does your interpretation of his willingness to accept pain and humiliation

from the widow affect your understanding of his character? How does it affect your interpretation of the novel as a whole?

8. The novel is structured to alternate equally between the widow's and the Muslim's points of view, with one exception: The twenty-fifth chapter is told through the viewpoint of the Muslim's wife. The telephone call that the wife receives from her husband at first terrifies her; then she is able to explain away her fears. She even reshapes her memories of past events, altering them to suit her need to believe that all is well. In what way does the wife's choice to forget or to reshape disturbing events in her past, contrast with the widow's inability to do the same?
9. Is AFTER an erotic novel? What role does sex play in advancing the lovers' understanding of one another? What role does it play in advancing the readers' understanding of these characters?

10. AFTER ends with the following paragraph:

“Feeling lighter in spirit, she looked down the beach, toward the town, searching for answers. Soon, in the distance, she saw a woman in a blood-red scarf running laboriously through the sand in her direction. Why, that’s me, she thought, that’s me; I’m running through the sand. I will run to the top of these very stairs, just as I ran through the sand yesterday morning. This time I will wait for myself. This time I will be calm. I will wait for her calmly, here at the top of these stairs, and when she reaches me, I will embrace her.”

Does this ending describe a woman who has learned to embrace herself and move on? Or has she fallen into a solipsistic nightmare from which there is no one left to rescue her? Her vision of herself running towards herself is clearly irrational; can it also be redemptive?

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