Reading Group Guide

Notes on a Scandal
[What Was She Thinking?]
A Novel

by Zoë Heller

ISBN: 0-312-42609-7
ISBN: 0-312-42199-0

About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about Notes on a Scandal 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 Notes on a Scandal.

About the Book

Notes on a Scandal 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, Notes on a Scandal explores love, passion, envy, loneliness, and friendship from every angle to create a vivid psychological portrait of characters caught between circumstance and manipulation.
Praise for the Book

“An intense, witty, literary page-turner”

—Entertainment Weekly

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

—The New Yorker

“A deliciously perverse, laugh-out-loud-funny novel.”

—Vogue

“A triumph of intelligence and narrative control.”

—The Times (London)

“Heller is a great ventriloquist of character, and as the unhinged curator of the Sheba affair, Barbara is painfully note perfect.”

—The Washington Post Book World

“Wicked and wonderful social satire.”

—Glamour

About the Author

Zoë Heller was born in London. Her work as a feature writer, critic, and columnist has appeared in The Independent on Sunday, London’s Sunday Times, The New Yorker, Vanity Fair, The London Review of Books, Esquire, The New Republic, and The Times Literary Supplement. She won the 2002 British Press Award for Columnist of the Year for her weekly column in London’s Telegraph. She is the author of the novel Everything You Know and has lived in New York City since 1993.

Discussion Questions

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 oglings of her academic colleagues since both indicate that they find her sexually 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 show 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.

For more information on Picador Reading Group Guides:
Call: 646-307-5629
Fax: 212-253-9627
E-mail: readinggroupguides@picadorusa.com

For a complete listing of reading group guides visit: www.picadorusa.com

Picador
What to Read Next®