

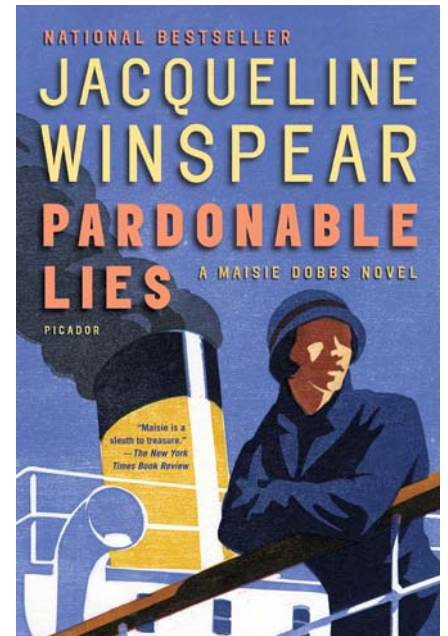
# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *Pardonable Lies*

*A Maisie Dobbs Novel*

*by Jacqueline Winspear*

ISBN: 0-312-42621-6



### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Pardonable Lies* 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 *Pardonable Lies*.

### About the Book

In the third novel of this unique and masterly crime series, a deathbed plea from his wife leads Sir Cecil Lawton, KC, to seek the aid of Maisie Dobbs, psychologist and investigator. As Maisie soon learns, Agnes Lawton never accepted that her aviator son was killed in the Great War, a torment that led her not only to the edge of madness but also to the doors of those who practice the dark arts and commune with the spirit world. Determined to prove Ralph Lawton either dead or alive, Maisie is plunged into a case that tests her spiritual strength, as well as her regard for her mentor, Maurice Blanche. The mission will bring her to France and reunite her with her old friend Priscilla Evernden, who lost three brothers in the war, one of whom has an intriguing connection to the case.

Set against a finely drawn portrait of life between the World Wars, *Pardonable Lies* is “a thrilling mystery that will enthrall fans of Jacqueline Winspear’s heroine and likely win her new ones” (*Detroit Free Press*).

“In Maisie Dobbs, Jacqueline Winspear has given us a real gift. Maisie Dobbs has not been created—she has been discovered. Such people are always there amongst us, waiting for somebody like Ms. Winspear to come along and reveal them. And what a revelation it is!”

—Alexander McCall Smith, author of *The No. 1 Ladies’ Detective Agency* series

“Maisie’s most assured outing to date . . . The mood and atmosphere of the period ring with authenticity, and the class tension that underlies many of Maisie’s dealings lends the narrative extra sparkle.”

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“For readers yearning for the calm and insightful intelligence of a main character like P. D. James’s Cordelia Gray, Maisie Dobbs is spot-on.”

—*The Boston Globe*

“A prim 1930s British gumshoe is one of the freshest, most modern heroines in recent memory. Maisie Dobbs takes her place in the upper echelon of literary female detectives, right next to Kinsey Millhone and Kay Scarpetta. . . . *Pardonable Lies* is as stylish as a whodunit gets.”

—*BookPage*

“I couldn’t put the book down and rushed out right away to get the other two. Maisie Dobbs is a joy.”

—*The Globe and Mail* (Toronto)

“Will thoroughly delight existing fans and should garner her new ones . . . Winspear carefully crafts each sentence, building toward a thrilling and emotional conclusion.”

—*Library Journal*

“If you haven’t read the Maisie Dobbs stories, you are missing a treat.”

—*The Ledger Independent* (Kentucky)

“Fans of Miss Marple and Precious Ramotswe are sure to embrace Maisie, a pitch-perfect blend of compassion and panache.”

—*Booklist*

## About the Author

Jacqueline Winspear is the author of two previous Maisie Dobbs novels, *Maisie Dobbs* and *Birds of a Feather*, which won the Agatha Award for Best Novel. A *New York Times* Notable Book, *Maisie Dobbs* was nominated for a record eight awards, including the Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Novel, and won both the Agatha and Macavity Awards for Best First Novel, as well as the Alex Award for an adult novel suitable for young adults. Born in England, Winspear now lives in California.

[Click here to read an interview with Jacqueline Winspear.](#)

## Discussion Questions

1. Three significant figures in *Pardonable Lies*—Avril Jarvis, Pascale Clement, and the younger Maisie Dobbs of the detective’s own tormented recollections—are all about thirteen years old. Why does the novel choose this moment in the three girls’ growth and development as a focal point for observation? Do the three girls have anything in common apart from age?
2. Although a number of mothers, including Agnes Lawton, Irene Nelson, Mrs. Jarvis, and Maisie’s own mother, are essentially absent as characters, they exert profound influence over events in the novel. What is the significance of the theme of the absent mother in *Pardonable Lies*?
3. In quite a few classic detective novels, including *The Maltese Falcon* and *Farewell, My Lovely*, homosexual characters experience violent or disrespectful treatment. Does the treatment of homosexuality in *Pardonable Lies* fundamentally differ from that in older detective fictions? How and why?
4. Compare Maisie’s current relationship with Dr. Andrew Dene and the role that her crippled ex-lover Simon continues to play in her life. Which is more important to Maisie, and why?
5. Maisie lied about her age to go to war and now routinely risks her life as a private investigator. Nevertheless, Priscilla Evernden observes that Maisie has “kept to the safe places.” Is she right? Explain.
6. Many of the characters in *Pardonable Lies*, including Maurice Blanche, Ralph Lawton, Jeremy Hazleton, and Maisie herself, engage in elaborate deceptions. Is there a deception in the novel that you consider less “pardonable” than the others? Why?
7. Is there a deception in the novel that you consider more “pardonable” than the others? Why?
8. Like Jacqueline Winspear’s previous novels, *Maisie Dobbs* and *Birds of a Feather*, *Pardonable Lies* is haunted by inescapable memories of World War I. In a sense, the war is the great crime from which the legal offenses and ethical transgressions of Winspear’s novels are the offshoots. How are the webs of falsehood and deception in this novel a response to the experiences and traumas of war? Do the lies in the novel make the aftermath of the war easier to bear, or do they compound the war’s original immorality?
9. Although Jacqueline Winspear frequently focuses on the physical and psychological scars of warfare, *Pardonable Lies* offers instances of something beautiful or noble that has emerged from the horror. Examples include the birth of Pascale Clement and Ralph Lawton’s heroic service in the Flying Corps. How does the novel’s introduction of these silver linings enrich or complicate Winspear’s depiction of the war and its aftermath?

10. Maisie often uses her training as a psychologist to take decisive control of a situation. Nevertheless, she sometimes experiences social situations in which she feels a lack of control. What are some of these situations, and why does she find them daunting?
11. The daughter of a costermonger, Maisie has risen somewhat above the limitations often encountered by members of her class. However, issues pertaining to class persist in the novel. Compare Jacqueline Winspear's treatment of aristocratic characters like Sir Cecil Lawton and Priscilla Evernden with her rendering of characters like Billy Beale and Lady Rowan's servants.
12. Maisie, who gives such extraordinary courage and support to others, must continually battle an inner sense of her own inadequacy. What are the sources of this feeling, and does she triumph over it?
13. Maisie knows a great deal about comforting others. Consider, however, the persons from whom she derives comfort. Do they have anything in common? To whom does she turn for particular kinds of support, and why?
14. In Chapter 8, Maisie asks herself, "What do I believe in?" Is this question answered in the novel? Does Maisie have beliefs that either strengthen or hinder her in her work or in her life?
15. Jacqueline Winspear offers a number of detailed descriptions of her characters' clothing. Given that Maisie is such a cerebral character, highly focused on the inner workings of the mind and heart, what may be the purpose of such external descriptions in the novel?
16. What role do Maisie's nightmares play in the unfolding of the plot and her character?

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