



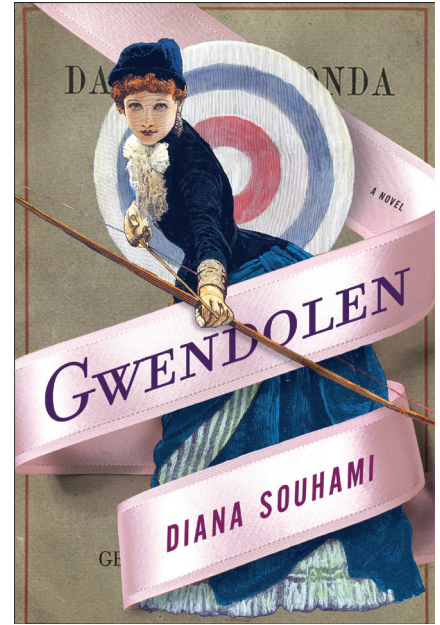
Reading Group Gold

Gwendolen

By Diana Souhami

About this Book

This historical novel, set in 19th-century Europe, opens with Gwendolen Harleth, an exceptionally beautiful upper-class Englishwoman, gambling boldly at a resort when she catches the eye of a handsome, pensive gentleman. His gaze unnerves her, and she loses her winnings. The next day, she learns unfortunate news: her widowed mother and younger sisters, for whom she is financially responsible, have lost their family's fortune. As a young woman in the 1870s with only her looks to serve her, Gwendolen's options are few, so when Henleigh Grandcourt, a wealthy aristocrat, proposes to her, she accepts, despite her discovery of an alarming secret about his past.



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This novel is Gwendolen's passionate later-life letter to the handsome man who caught her eye at the gambling tables—the man she did not marry—and reveals what happened across the brutal and transformative years of her early twenties, after she married Grandcourt instead. That Gwendolen is also the heroine of George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda* (and is writing to Deronda) will intrigue and delight legions of Eliot fans, but debut novelist and award-winning biographer Souhami has brilliantly and movingly breathed fresh life into a classic story in ways that will appeal to readers entirely unfamiliar with Eliot's fictions. Souhami does not hesitate to address social and gender identity issues that elicit both discussion and contemplation.

Discussion Questions

1. This narrative is written as a letter, giving the reader a multi-layered perspective (Gwendolen's experience at the time of each event, her thoughts from the point of view of her older self, the thinking she directs very specifically to Deronda, etc.). Do these layers heighten your reading of the book? If so, how?
2. From the very start of the novel Gwendolen's feelings toward people are immediate and fiercely intense. What do you think triggers her affections? What turns her against people, and why?
3. Do you trust Gwendolen as a narrator?
4. What do you believe to be the significance of the mother/daughter relationship in the novel?
5. How would you characterize the shift in Grandcourt's personality after his marriage to Gwendolen? Were you surprised by that shift?
6. Grandcourt's death torments Gwendolen's conscience. Do you think she is guilty of his murder? Why or why not?



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7. At one point late in the story Gwendolen refers to herself as the “daughter of Narcissus”(283), yet she makes hard choices for the betterment of her family. Do you think she is a narcissist? Why or why not?
8. At the opening of the novel Gwendolen says, “I viewed myself as superior to provincial society... Being so much admired and so often told I was beautiful set me apart...I came to see my beauty as a kind of genius, an accomplishment of my own doing”(17). And after her torturous experiences with Grandcourt, we read, “I concentrated and felt safe within myself and without embarrassment or alarm at Paul looking intently at my partly naked body. ...no one, I vowed, would again diminish me” (305). Do Gwendolen’s attitudes/beliefs about the purpose of the physical body change throughout the novel? If so, in what ways?
9. The city of London and the people who live there represent emotional and societal liberation in the novel. Explore the theme of City vs. Country in this novel. What does the book seem to say about the role of societal context in shaping personal belief and perspective?
10. What’s the significance of Gwendolen cutting her hair (303)?
11. In the first half of the book, Deronda is the pillar of morality for Gwendolen. As she becomes acquainted with a wider circle of society she seems to “give up” what she believes to be the hard lines of Deronda’s morality. How does her understanding of the moral universe change from the beginning to the end of the book?
12. Multiple people encourage Gwendolen to forget the past; to forget the harshness of what has been and look to the future. What do you think of this advice for Gwendolen?
13. What questions does the novel raise about the possibility of recovery/healing after domestic abuse?
14. Author Diana Souhami presents the writer George Eliot as a foil for Gwendolen, and the character—Barbara Bodichon—becomes Gwendolen’s mentor. What do George and Barbara have in common?
15. After many years and everything she has been through, Gwendolen ends the story still in love with Deronda. Do you believe she really loves him? What does Deronda signify for her?



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About this Author

Diana Souhami is the author of twelve critically acclaimed nonfiction and biography books, including *Selkirk's Island* (winner of the Whitbread Biography Award), *The Trials of Radclyffe Hall* (winner of the Lambda Literary Award and shortlisted for the James Tait Black Prize for Biography), and the bestselling *Mrs. Keppel and Her Daughter* (winner of the Lambda Literary Award and a New York Times Notable Book of the Year). She lives in London.



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