



The
**RADCLIFFE
LADIES'
READING
CLUB**

a novel

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For Those Who Are Lost

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Alice reflects that many times our most profound reading experiences come from books we wouldn't have expected. What book has had the most surprising effect on you?
2. How would you characterize Caroline? What effect does her wealth have on her relationships with the other women?
3. How does Alice select titles for discussion in the book club? Do you think her selections live up to her expectations?
4. Tess never expected to make friends in college. Why is she more comfortable on the sidelines? Does the newness of her relationships change the way she acts?
5. What are each book club member's expectations for marriage? How do their observations of their parents contribute to those assumptions? Whose views are changed the most by the readings in the book club?
6. How is reputation dangerous even when it doesn't contain

truth? What effect does reputation have on the events around the Christmas dance?

7. How does Tess handle her discovery about Caroline's secret? Why does she react this way? What would you have done in her position?
8. Caroline forgives Tess and even contributes somewhat to her criminal defense. Did Tess deserve forgiveness? What do you think is next for her?
9. By the end of the book, the principal characters have for the most part gone their separate ways. Do you think their friendships would have been more durable in other circumstances? What might have driven them apart if not the events of the Christmas dance? What do Merritt and Caroline do differently that allows them to stay close?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

How did you first begin writing *The Radcliffe Ladies' Reading Club*? What was your inspiration?

Several things led me to write this book. First, I love thinking back to the days of being a brand-new college freshman. It's such a time of discovering yourself: finding out which things you hang on to from the past and which thoughts and habits you adopt in a new environment. But this book actually begins with Alice and the Cambridge Bookshop. She's a dream mentor, someone who encourages and inspires these young women and helps them consider new ideas at a critical stage in their lives. Of course, I love bookstores, and it was exciting to create the one I'd own myself if I had the chance.

Alice is surprised that the girls' college experiences seem to be so different from her own. How did you research the attitudes of the first generations of female college students?

I interviewed several women a generation older than myself and found that they have as many varied experiences as we did when we went to college. That allowed me the freedom to write Alice's experiences as I wanted to imagine them. Talking with old-

er graduates gave me an appreciation for those who were the first person in their families to go to college. It was inspiring to see how they courageously changed the trajectories of their lives.

One of the things I discovered while writing the book is that so many men did not want Radcliffe to be built at all. They thought it was dangerous to allow women to be educated because it would threaten their control. Even today, it's important to understand how vital education is and what an impact it can have in a woman's life.

Which member of the book club do you most identify with? Were any of the perspectives especially challenging to write?

What an interesting question! As is typical with my books, I see elements of myself in more than one character. I was the earnest student like Tess, the quiet observer like Merritt, and today I imagine myself more as Alice Campbell, someone who loves books and sharing them with others.

It was most challenging to write Tess, because I felt sympathetic toward her, but I could also see her impulses getting the better of her. And without having a firm anchor, someone she trusted whom she could go to for advice, she allowed her imagination to run wild with no one to rein her in.

What is the most challenging part of writing historical fiction?

I love writing historical fiction. I am a natural student, so I enjoy studying the time periods of my books, everything from pol-

itics to fashion. However, I never thought I would write historical fiction because I was afraid I wasn't an expert in a particular area. Then one day I realized my favorite books were all historical fiction, and I took a critical look at what I liked most about those novels. In the end, I decided I would be an expert on my characters and that studying the time period of each story was a wonderful perk of writing books set in a different era.

Alice's reading selections are intended to challenge the girls' assumptions. What book have you read recently that challenged you the most?

Good books really do change, challenge, and inspire you. A recent example of this for me was the book *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* by Muriel Spark, written in 1961. I expected a tame and possibly lackluster book about a teacher and her pupils in 1930s Edinburgh, but I found myself shocked at times and pulled into the story, fascinated by the complex behaviors and motivations of the main character. Certain quotes from the book resonated with me, such as: "Outwardly, she differed from the rest of the teaching staff in that she was still in a state of fluctuating development, whereas they had only too understandably not trusted themselves to change their minds, particularly on ethical questions, after the age of twenty."

That brought up a number of questions for me. Do we allow ourselves to really think? To change our points of view as we grow

older? Or do we rigidly hold on to beliefs we haven't examined in years because it is expected of us? I discovered this book after writing *The Radcliffe Ladies' Reading Club*, but it would have been a fine inspiration had I found it earlier.