

"A gorgeous ode to the power of female courage."
—KATE QUINN, *New York Times* Bestselling Author of *The Alice Network*

WOMAN 99



A NOVEL

GREER
MACALLISTER

USA Today Bestselling Author of *The Magician's Lie*

Reading Group Guide

1. How does Charlotte feel when she wakes and realizes that her sister has been taken to Goldengrove Asylum? If you had a loved one who was taken away like this, how would you feel? What would you do when you heard the news?
2. What do you think of Charlotte's plan? If you were in her shoes, would you feign insanity to enter Goldengrove as well? What other actions could she have taken?
3. Describe Charlotte and Henry's relationship. How does she view him? How does it evolve over the course of the story? What is standing in their way?
4. What do you make of some of Goldengrove's "treatments"? Which one do you think would be the most difficult to handle?
5. Compare and contrast Phoebe and Charlotte. How are they similar? Different? What is their relationship like? Do you think you're more like Charlotte or Phoebe?
6. What do you make of Charlotte and Phoebe's mother? What is her biggest fear? How does she let those fears impact her children?

7. At one point, Nora says, “It only takes two things to make a woman insane: the word of a man who stands to benefit and a doctor willing to sell his say-so.” What do you make of this? What does this say about the role of women at this time? Do you think this same idea still applies today?
8. Why do you think Nora agrees to be Dr. Concord’s mistress? What does she get out of the deal? What do you make of her choice at the end?
9. *Woman 99* deals with many aspects of mental health. How are mental health and mental illness perceived by the characters in the novel? Does this differ from how they are perceived today? How does stigma affect our reaction to and treatment of mental health?
10. Describe some of the women at Goldengrove. Who is your favorite? How does Charlotte come to view them? How do they help her save Phoebe? What are some of the challenges they face?
11. What is Phoebe like when Charlotte finally finds her in the asylum? How has she changed? After the girls escape, why does Phoebe choose to return to Goldengrove?
12. What do you make of the matron and superintendent of Goldengrove? Do you see them as villains? How are their actions shaped by societal forces?
13. Why do you think Henry wants to reform Goldengrove? How can Charlotte help? Do you think there is still a need for reform in today’s mental health institutions? Can you give any examples?

A Conversation with the Author

What inspired you to write *Woman 99*?

As always, a few sparks from different sources combined to form a kernel of inspiration. In the case of *Woman 99*, I was largely inspired by Nellie Bly, the intrepid reporter of the 1880s, and her groundbreaking firsthand investigative reporting for the *New York World*. She got herself committed to an insane asylum by acting (1) poor and (2) crazy in New York City, spending ten days in the notorious Blackwell's Island Asylum. She did it to call attention to the terrible conditions there, and I considered writing specifically about her, but then I decided to explore a different spin: What if someone pretended insanity for different reasons? That's how Charlotte Smith came to be. She gets herself committed in order to rescue her sister. It's not a well-thought-out plan, of course, but fiction is so much more interesting when people don't always make wise choices.

What research did you have to do to bring this time period, and Goldengrove, to life?

So much! Lots of reading of firsthand accounts of asylum life, which is not the cheeriest reading there is. But in order to create a fully realized world for the reader, I'm pulling everything from every source I can find to draw both the privileged and pampered world of the Smiths in San Francisco, followed by the much bleaker world inside the walls of the asylum. I made the decision early on

to use a fictional asylum instead of a real one so I could design it and people it as I chose. But all the treatments mentioned, and all the reasons for committing women to institutions, I took from the historical record.

Throughout the story, there's a recurring theme of characters silencing strong female voices. Do you think that is a prevalent theme in today's world?

Ugh, I wish it were far less relevant than it is. In a sense, it's even worse now, because we thought we'd come so far—women can vote, hold office, get jobs, earn money, pursue their own goals—and yet this age-old prejudice, this antique discrimination, is still very much with us. I wrote a much angrier book than I was originally intending, and it absolutely has to do with the current political environment.

Goldengrove is a chilling place. If you were one of the characters trapped there, what aspect would you find the most terrifying?

I plunged Charlotte immediately into my personal nightmare, actually. When I first read about the benches, that terrified me. Being forced to sit still for hours on end, your body aching, your mind racing, unable to talk or turn or eat or... I mean, like I said: personal nightmare. And being drugged without knowing it, which she's also dealing with shortly after her arrival at Goldengrove, that idea also terrifies me. I have an extremely vivid imagination, which is great as a writer, but it also has a very dark side, which I gave to Charlotte to explore.

Which character did you enjoy writing the most?

Martha was a lot of fun. Nora, too, but especially Martha, because she just breaks through all the BS. There's great joy in writing the kind of character who says the thing everyone else is thinking. She

wasn't in my initial outline, but once I came up with the idea of her, I felt like she kind of took over. Which I'm very happy about.

Which character posed the greatest challenge?

In very different ways, both Celia and Mrs. Smith, Charlotte and Phoebe's mother, were challenging to write. The knot I was working through with Celia was mostly logistical: How aware is she? How much can she say? What will she do given the choice to confront the person who tried to kill her? With Mrs. Smith, it was much more emotional. She's not a villain, she's not evil, but she makes some very questionable decisions in the name of getting things she has always wanted and avoiding things she has always feared. She's kind of similar to Arden's mother in my first novel, *The Magician's Lie*, in that I think modern mothers are horrified by the choices she makes, but most women of that time didn't have the luxury of looking at things the same way modern mothers do.

What do you think happens to Charlotte and Phoebe after the story ends?

I hope they both find what they're looking for. I think it's possible. Over the course of the book, both of them really get a sense of how the world they're living in doesn't fit them, so they have to choose ways to pursue happiness. Phoebe may or may not decide the asylum is really where she belongs. Charlotte may or may not find Henry to be the life partner she dreamed. But they're both taking action to be true to themselves and what they need. That's the first step to a happy ending.

What other authors or books inspire you?

Margaret Atwood has always been a major inspiration—her creativity, her willingness to take risks, and, of course, the stellar quality of her prose. And these days, I'm finding a huge amount of inspiration in my fellow historical fiction writers, other women

whose fiction is inspired by the badass women of the past. Fiction is such an amazing way to bring attention to important issues without clubbing people over the head with Learning Life Lessons. I could read a historical novel inspired by the actions of women from history every single day and not run out of worthwhile books to read for years on end.

What does your writing process look like?

Oh, it's a mess. I start with an outline and synopsis to organize my thoughts, but once I start writing, it's all kinds of messy. It doesn't really start to look like a book until I've rewritten it twice. I draft almost exclusively on the computer, but when I'm doing a full review and edit, I absolutely have to have it in paper form. Then I go sit at a bar somewhere with a glass of wine and a red pen, and I work. So sometimes my writing process looks like a lot of fun! Maybe as I write more and more books, I'll eventually get to a point where the book in my head is the book I write in a first draft, but I've been doing this a couple of decades now, and this may just be how I write. And as long as I get to a book that I'm proud of at the end, I can't complain too much. The time it takes is the time it takes.