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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide



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The Thirteenth Tale
by
Diane Setterfield
(New York: Atria Books, 2006)

Author:

Diane Setterfield began her career as a professor of French literature in England and France. Exhausted by the work and disenchanted by university politics, she gave up her university position to become a writer, before, she says, she even knew what she wanted to write. "It might seem bold or brave, but really it comes down to how much you want to do something. If you want to do something so badly, then you have to take a bold decision"

(http://www.bookbrowse.com/biographies/index.cfm?author_number=1376).

It took several years for Setterfield to find her book, and then write and rewrite it. In the interim, she renovated her house and ran a business teaching French to people planning to move to France. She developed a routine of writing in the mornings, leaving her afternoons free for quiet thinking time. Ironically, the success of *The Thirteenth Tale*, with the attendant book tours and interviews, has left the author with little time for writing.

Setterfield is 42. She lives in Harrogate, Yorkshire, with her husband Peter Whittall and four cats. Although she has published several academic books on French literature and particularly the work of André Gide, *The Thirteenth Tale* is her first novel.

Summary:

Vida Winter is nearly as famous for her reclusiveness and the wild, ever-changing tales she offers to anyone seeking a history of her life as she is for her acclaimed novels. And so, quiet, obscure Margaret Lea, a bookseller's daughter and biographer of little-known literary figures, is startled when she receives a letter from the famous Miss Winter. The letter invites, or rather summons, Margaret to be Miss Winter's biographer.

Margaret is doubtful, but she cannot turn down such an invitation. She packs up her paper and her pencils and travels to Miss Winter's home in the North of England, where she

discovers that the aging author is dying, painfully and slowly, fighting to survive long enough that she may at last tell her own, true story. Margaret accepts the job, but — wary of Miss Winter's reputation for offering extravagant lies in place of biography — insists that Miss Winter first give her three confirmable facts, as insurance against the possibility that the author means to offer yet another colorful lie.

Vida Winter is no less imposing for the disease that is ravaging her body. She agrees to tell Margaret the entire story — the truth — but not without conditions: "After this, no more jumping about in the story. From tomorrow, I will tell you my story, beginning at the beginning, continuing with the middle, and with the end at the end. Everything in its proper place. No cheating. No looking ahead. No questions. No sneaky glances at the last page" (p. 52). Once she has confirmed her facts, Margaret must simply listen, allowing the story to develop as Miss Winter wishes to tell it. The great author will control the last story she has to tell.

The story Vida Winter tells Margaret is a dark, Gothic labyrinth, full of moldering estates, incest, lost siblings, and strange twins. It centers around the Angelfield family: Charlie and Isabelle, a brother and sister with a relationship that is hardly fraternal; Isabelle's feral twin daughters, Adeline and Emmeline; and the mostly unsuspected ghost who shares their lives.

Margaret is drawn into the story, entangled in it by her identification with the young twin sisters at the center of the tale and her sense of sorrow for her own twin sister, dead at birth, as much as by her need to find the truth of Vida Winter's story. She finds herself unable to stick to her agreement with Miss Winter. She is a biographer, after all, and so she seeks on her own the truths she senses Miss Winter will not tell her, visiting Angelfield and initiating inquiries about Charlie's mysterious disappearance and the fate of Hester, the twins' governess. In the process, Margaret returns another lost child, now grown, to his home and makes peace with her own ghostly sister.

Questions:

While answers are provided, there is no presumption that you have been given the last word. Readers bring their own personalities to the books that they are examining. What is obvious and compelling to one reader may be invisible to the next. The questions that have been selected provide one reasonable access to the text; the answers are intended to give you examples of what a reflective reader might think. The variety of possible answers is one of the reasons we find book discussions such a rewarding activity.

1. What role do books play in *The Thirteenth Tale*?

The Thirteenth Tale is a novel framed and shaped, virtually permeated, by books. From the fictional book referred to in its title to Margaret's deep love of books — deeper than her affection for most people — to Miss Winter's renown as a great author, books are the lifeblood of the plot. Miss Winter chooses Margaret as her biographer based on a book she has written, a biography of the Landier brothers, obscure literary brothers who wrote

a diary together. When Margaret sets out to investigate Miss Winter's tale on her own, she turns first to a book, an almanac of the aristocracy.

But other books, books that exist in our world, are also vitally important to *The Thirteenth Tale*. The diction, the plot, the feel of the book owe much to a particular kind of nineteenth-century novel, the gothic romance exemplified by the books Margaret and Miss Winter both love, titles like *The Woman in White*, *The Castle of Otranto*, *Lady Audley's Secret*, *Wuthering Heights*, and of course, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. These are books in which romantic yearnings are entangled with supernatural manifestations, in which the barriers to true love or to a satisfying life more generally are at least metaphorically ghostly. In gothic romances, no one escapes his past, and everyone in range is liable to be damaged when that past demands satisfaction, but happy endings remain possible.

Jane Eyre, in particular, exerts an almost magical pull on the story, shaping events in ways obvious to readers of both books. Like *The Thirteenth Tale*, *Jane Eyre* is the story of a foundling raised in wretched circumstances and forced to make her own way in the world; Aurelius doesn't read far enough into the book — or know enough of his own history — to realize it is not his story, but his aunt's. The fire that destroys Angelfield, like the fire that engulfs Mr. Rochester's home, is both disfiguring and liberating, freeing the survivors from the burdens of the past even as it leaves them with scars both physical and emotional.

In the end, *The Thirteenth Tale* is a different book from *Jane Eyre*, more similar to Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* — itself an heir to Charlotte Brontë's first and most famous novel — in its ambiguous ending. *Jane Eyre* eventually marries Mr. Rochester; if their happiness is attenuated by his blindness, a result of the fire that kills his insane first wife, they do at least find love and peace. The nameless narrator of *Rebecca* escapes the scene of tragedy, but she cannot escape her dreams of Manderley, the estate lost to fire, or the shadow of her husband's first wife, the cruel Rebecca de Winter. Similarly, Vida Winter makes a life for herself and her beloved sister, Emmeline, but she cannot escape Adeline's long shadow or leave behind the scars of the fire at Angelfield.

2. What does Vida Winter's mysterious thirteenth tale have to do with The Thirteenth Tale?

Much of the mythology of Vida Winter is taken up with the lost thirteenth tale, the story that was supposed to appear as the final installment in her first book, *Thirteen Tales of Change and Desperation*. When the book was accidentally released with only twelve tales, and then hastily recalled and re-released as *Tales of Change and Desperation*, the thirteenth tale took on a stature of its own, the cornerstone of Vida Winter's mystery. Throughout her career, the missing tale takes on a mythical resonance. Ironically, famous as she is, Vida Winter is at least as famous for the one story no one has read as she is for her many novels.

At her death, Vida Winter passes the story, or what there is of it, at least, on to Margaret, to do with as she will. It is, Miss Winter says in the accompanying note, "a flimsy thing: something of nothing" (p. 400). What it really is is Vida Winter's first, failed attempt to mythologize herself, to make something of the pain of her childhood, a "story invented by an imaginative child to fill the void where her mother ought to have been" (p. 401). The thirteenth tale is Vida Winter's incomplete mythologization of her own birth, perhaps unfinishable because she has so thoroughly shed that identity, taking on instead the mythology of another.

As the novel's title implies, however, Vida Winter's life is itself the missing thirteenth tale, the last piece of the story she has spent a career avoiding. Like the recast fairy tales that make up *Tales of Change and Desperation*, Vida Winter's biography is itself a tale of change wrought by desperation, an example of the extraordinary transformations people will undertake in order to survive.

3. Margaret annoys Miss Winter by insisting on the difference between biography and storytelling; how different are the two pursuits really?

When Margaret challenges Miss Winter on the many versions of her life story she has already told, the author replies, "It's my profession. I'm a storyteller." For Miss Winter, Margaret's pursuit of biography, her insistence on working with facts, is "horribly dull. . . . Don't you think one can tell the truth much better with a story?" (p. 46). As a reader, Margaret may be willing to concede the fundamental truth of a good story, but as a biographer, she cannot. Biography is about verifiable fact as much as it is about narrative truth.

If biography clings to a sharper, more limited notion of truth than the expansive truths of story, there are other, subtler ways in which biography is far more murky than story. A story has a clear beginning, a middle, and an end that reveals all. Miss Winter tries to cast her own biography in that vein when she insists that Margaret hear the story in order, "beginning at the beginning . . . with the end at the end" (p. 52). But this fundamental structure, the element of order that Miss Winter insists is responsible for the popularity of her work, falls apart almost immediately under the pressure of biography. Biography has no proper beginning, or at least "the beginning is never where you think it is. . . . Human lives are not pieces of string that can be separated out from a knot of others and laid out straight. . . . A birth is not really a beginning. Our lives at the start are not really our own but only the continuation of someone else's story" (p. 58). Vida Winter's biography cannot be separated from that of Isabelle and Charlie Angelfield, or even of the village of Angelfield. Once, when Margaret asks about what happened to Hester, the governess, Miss Winter warns wryly that "it doesn't do to get attached to these secondary characters. It's not their story" (p. 192). In a novel, that might be true; but the lines are not so clearly cut in biography. Vida Winter's story is also Adeline's story and Emmeline's and even Hester's story. Indeed, as the ending reveals, much of the story Vida Winter offers as her biography is only peripherally hers at all. Much as she manages to "absent herself from herself" when questioned by Margaret (p. 51), she implies her role in the story without ever revealing herself. And so, to tell her own story, Vida Winter must tell Isabelle and

Charlie's story, and the story of Merrily and the pram, and some of Hester's story. Even then, the tale is not complete until Aurelius has told his story, which is really Mrs. Love's story. Biography has no limits.

At the same time, there are important links between biography and storytelling. Biography, Miss Winter tells Margaret, is "compost" for story, the raw matter from which fiction is germinated. At the same time, Miss Winter has used fiction to avoid her biography. Fiction has allowed her to put off the demands of memory, to resist the pleas of the "green-eyed girl" who haunts her imagination (pp. 113-114). In this, she and Margaret have something in common; as Vida Winter has produced a string of masterpieces in an effort to avoid her biography, Margaret has escaped her own life by reading classic fiction, and especially the nineteenth-century gothic romances epitomized by books like *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*.

4. How do characters in the novel enact Vida Winter's assertion that "all children mythologize their birth"?

The assertion with which Vida Winter opens her first book also acts as the epigraph to *The Thirteenth Tale*. And indeed, every major character in the book — with the exception of Miss Winter herself, who characterizes her own birth as a "subplot" (p. 58) — mythologizes his or her birth to some extent.

Margaret's entire life is shaped by the mythology of her lost twin, her existence haunted by the shadowy double she imagines living on the other side of the windowpane. Margaret's personal mythology is built around a double loss: of the sister she can never know and the mother she was never allowed to know, the woman with a "spontaneous smile, laughter in her eyes, warmth in her gaze" who disappeared with Margaret's birth (p. 35). This mythology of loss focuses Margaret on her own grief, leaving her no room to see the burdens her mother carries, to understand why she keeps secrets. Only as she engages with Vida Winter's story, only as she struggles to find a perspective on the tragedies that shaped the author's life, can she begin to see her own mother's struggles and begin to understand her own mythology from a different perspective.

As a foundling, Aurelius has little choice but to construct a mythology of his birth; there is no one who can connect him to the reality of his history. For him, the things that were found with him — the hunter's bag in which he was bundled, the silver spoon, the single page from *Jane Eyre* — are his mythology: "These things are my story," he tells Margaret, almost desperately. "These things tell me who I am" (p. 232). In spite of his nearly sixty years of life, in spite of the happy childhood provided him by Mrs. Love and the successful catering business based on her recipes, he locates his entire sense of self in these faded artifacts. Like Margaret's, Aurelius's mythology is centered on what is not and what cannot be.

5. How is reading dangerous in this novel?

Margaret warns early on that reading can be dangerous, but her warning is playfully offered; she suggests it as the conclusion to be drawn from an incident in her childhood, when she became so engrossed in a book that she fell from the wall on which she was sitting (p. 4). It is an incident peculiar to a particular kind of naïve reader, one who can still become so engrossed that she loses track of her physical surroundings. It is the reason, she tells us, that she never reads standing up. Margaret admits that she no longer possesses that capacity; she has lost the child's elemental sense that books are not only the important thing, but "*everything*" (p. 32). That kind of absorption is lost to her as an adult.

But *The Thirteenth Tale* suggests that the dangers of reading are far more pervasive and far darker than Margaret's amusing childhood tale would allow. These dangers are not confined to the naïve reader, nor can they be limited to childhood. Reading is a dangerous pastime; words have an inescapable physicality. They are active, malevolent forces:

There is something about words. In expert hands, manipulated deftly, they take you prisoner. Wind themselves around your limbs like spider silk, and when you are so enthralled you cannot move, they pierce your skin, enter your blood, numb your thoughts. Inside you they work their magic. (pp. 8-9)

And once the words have worked their magic, the reader is changed forever. Margaret finds herself possessed by Vida Winter's *Tales of Change and Desperation*, held captive by it. Vida Winter's words restore to Margaret "the virginal qualities of the novice reader, and then . . . ravished [her]" (p. 32). No reader can emerge from this experience unaltered.

Margaret's mother suspects the power of words and the dangers of reading them. Keenly aware of how a story can sit too heavily on the heart, she "could not read a book for fear of the feelings she might find in it" (p. 34). She cannot withstand the onslaught of words, and so she does not read. Margaret pities her for this, but Margaret's own compulsive reading does not suggest that her mother's choice is unhealthy. Indeed, Margaret is herself afflicted by an ailment that the doctor suggests, not entirely jokingly, is attributable to her overindulgence in a particular sort of 19th-century novel (pp. 302-3). "For me," Margaret admits, "to see is to read" (p. 20), and that compulsion shapes — some would say misshapes — her life. Like spider silk, a single moment of reading enmeshes her in a web of secret grief, binds her to a sister she never knew and so cannot escape. Reading is indeed dangerous.

6. What role do secrets play in the events of the novel and the lives of its protagonists?

The Thirteenth Tale is, at its core, a novel about secrets and the ways that the characters are shaped by secrets, their own and the secrets of those around them. Vida Winter is "as famous for her secrets as for her stories" (p. 11), and Margaret is forever scarred by her discovery, at the age of ten, that her mother has kept a secret. Worse, "it wasn't her secret to keep. It was [Margaret's]" (p. 18). That secret — and Margaret's own secret knowledge of it — warp the relationship between mother and daughter; the grief they cannot share

hangs always in the air between them. Only when Margaret has discovered Vida Winter's secret can she begin to understand her mother's painful decision and reach for a more open relationship with both of her parents, and coincidentally with the wider world.

Margaret's accidental discovery of her dead sister is but the first illustration of Vida Winter's axiom that "there can be no secrets in a house where there are children" (p. 59). Every parent has been embarrassed at some point by a vivid illustration of that truth. But children, in this novel, can themselves embody secrets. The nameless child in the garden who startles Hester becomes Adeline March, replacing the first, untameable Adeline, but before that, she is only a ghost. She is "the secret of the house," kept by Missus and John-the-Dig (p. 350), a secret whose origins are coded in the copper hair and emerald eyes that mark her as an illegitimate child of the master of the house, and allow her to pass, on occasion, as one of the twins. Similarly, Aurelius is a secret even to himself. As a foundling, he cannot have any real idea of his origins, though he senses he must have come from Angelfield. He is Emmeline's secret; as an infant in need of care, he threatens Adeline's secret. When she leaves him at Mrs. Love's doorstep, the girl who has taken Adeline's place — who will become Vida Winter — means to find a way out of all of the secrets, to leave Angelfield behind and make a life for herself and Emmeline and the baby. In the end, that proves impossible. The secrets remain, and Aurelius grows up an orphan.

Secrets are not easily given up. Miss Winter and Margaret have both lived with their secrets for so long that they cannot find a way to live without them. Vida Winter can only tell her secrets indirectly, hoping Margaret can ferret them out. Margaret, for her part, denies that she has any story rather than reveal her secrets to Vida Winter; her truth is exposed only in a moment of great emotional stress. In the end, the secrets evaporate, allowing new relationships to be forged. Margaret finds a way to talk to her parents, and Aurelius discovers that he does, in fact, have a family.

7. How do houses reflect their inhabitants in this novel?

Like the book whose secrets are hinted at by its cover, houses reveal much about their owners. This is especially true in *The Thirteenth Tale*, where houses are virtual reflections of their inhabitants. Margaret's room above her father's bookshop, Angelfield, and Miss Winter's Yorkshire home all reveal much about the people who live in them, as does Aurelius's cozy cottage.

Like their inhabitants, Margaret's room and Miss Winter's home retreat from the world. The little room, hidden above the bookshop, is a sanctuary, a place for Margaret to withdraw and read, to return to her true home — in the pages of the novels she loves. Like Miss Winter herself, who is "a perfect mystery" (p. 11), the author's home is guarded by walls and surrounded by a labyrinthine garden. The deceptiveness of the garden, where paths seem to go on forever and getting from here to there can seem impossible, mirrors the barriers Miss Winter has thrown up to those seeking her biography — even Margaret. Margaret, lost in the garden, discovers the previously

unsuspected presence of Emmeline in Vida Winter's home, as she eventually discovers the ghost at the center of Vida Winter's story.

Similarly, Angelfield, the ancestral home of a family in undeniable decline, riddled with incest and violence, is a disquieting place. It does not welcome, but repels:

The house sat at an awkward angle. Arriving from the drive, you came upon a corner, and it was not at all clear which side of the house was the front. It was as though the house knew it ought to meet its arriving visitors face-on, but at the last minute couldn't repress the impulse to turn back and gaze upon the deer park and the woodlands at the end of the terraces. The visitor was met not by a welcoming smile but by a cold shoulder (p. 127).

The house, like the family, turns in on itself. Like the increasingly strange family for which it is named, the house is disquietingly odd, an awkward amalgamation of architectural styles with an uneven roofline and "a higgledy-piggledy arrangement" of windows (p. 127). It has been brought to ruin by fire, but before that by water. The house is brought down by the mysterious forces of damp, moving through "secret gullies and runways . . . in unexpected directions" (p. 198); the family is brought down by unnatural affections and secret obsessions.

Aurelius's sturdy cottage stands in stark contrast to all of these secretive homes. His cottage, "built for endurance rather than decoration, but attractive all the same" reflects his own practical nature (p. 230). The single modern addition, the large kitchen, offers comfort and sustenance; it is also, not coincidentally, where Aurelius keeps the souvenirs of his infancy. The kitchen, with its modern appliances and the recipe book inherited from Mrs. Love, is where Aurelius forges his own story.

8. How does the structure of this novel reflect its plot?

The Thirteenth Tale is a novel constructed of plots within plots, stories intersecting and containing other stories. Margaret's story frames Miss Winter's, which also contains the secret of Aurelius's birth. Miss Winter's story is itself constructed of two threads: the story of her past, which she is telling Margaret, and her present, consumed by the illness that is killing her slowly and painfully and by her concern for Emmeline. Still other stories are drawn in around the edges: the story of Hester's relationship with Angelfield's doctor; Mrs. Love's tale; even a brief biography of Ambrose, Aurelius's father.

At first glance, the novel seems like a relatively straightforward story-within-a-story. Margaret, struggling with her own ghosts, listens to Vida Winter's ghost story. But, in the end, the novel is more complex than that. Miss Winter is simply not capable of telling a straightforward story. Other stories intrude; other stories fill in the gaps.

Miss Winter, beginning her tale, concedes that biography cannot be told as a single story; it is, rather, a web of stories: "Impossible to touch one part of it without setting the rest vibrating. Impossible to understand one part without having a sense of the whole" (p. 58). And so, *The Thirteenth Tale* is a web of stories, each vibrating in concert with the others.

Miss Winter's struggle with her dying sister becomes interwoven with Margaret's struggle to come to terms with her own dead sister. Mrs. Love's story, offered by Aurelius in lieu of the personal story he does not have, is offered as an aside, but proves central to unraveling the mystery. Even Missus and John-the-Dig have stories that intersect with the central radial thread of Miss Winter's secret.

Further Reading:

Keith Donohue, *The Stolen Child* (2006)

Henry Day is seven when he is kidnapped by hobgoblins and a changeling is left in his place. The rest of the novel narrates in haunting detail each Henry's struggle to come to terms with who he is and who he has become. So much more than a fairy tale, *The Stolen Child* is a touching exploration of a boy's struggle to find himself and to make peace with the boy he might have been.

William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936)

Absalom! Absalom! continues the story of the Compson family Faulkner introduced in earlier works and introduces the Sutpen family. The novel focuses on Thomas Sutpen's doomed attempt to found a family dynasty in the antebellum South. Faulkner's difficult stream-of-consciousness style requires the reader to piece the story together out of the contributions of a number of narrators, but the effort is well-rewarded by a complex plot of family betrayal and incest that examines the destructive conflicts of the Southern character.

Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898)

Probably the most read of James's works today, this novella is also one of the great literary ghost stories. A young governess, put in charge of two young children at a remote country estate, suspects that her young charges are being controlled by the sinister previous governess and her lover. As only the governess seems to be aware of the shadow of evil hovering over the house, the source of her horror remains ambiguous, and the story all the more terrifying for the uncertainty.

Arturo Pérez-Reverte, *The Club Dumas* (1993; Trans. by Sonia Soto, 1997)

Lucas Corso, a slightly disreputable book dealer, is called in to authenticate an original manuscript chapter of Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*, found at the scene of a murder, and to track down the manuscript of a medieval guide for calling forth Satan. Chasing the mystery through Europe, Corso finds himself entangled in a web of murder, literary mayhem, and the occult. A highly intelligent, very suspenseful thriller about the little-known underworld of rare book trading.

Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith* (2002)

Susan Trinder and Maud Lilly are orphan girls, both raised without their mothers. But Susan is a "fingersmith," a pickpocket raised with love by the matron of a den of thieves; Maud, as the scion of a wealthy family, has been raised in a vast estate that is both literally and metaphorically cold. The two are brought together when a fellow thief, ironically called Gentleman, suggests to Susan that she should participate in a plot, ostensibly to part Maud from her fortune. Both Susan and Maud are eventually

victimized by Gentleman's twisted scheming, entangled in a plot that will lead each to betray the other — even as they acknowledge their love for each other.

Carlos Ruiz Zafón, *The Shadow of the Wind* (2001; English translation 2004)

Another child of a bookstore owner gets lost in the folds of a real-life story that is mirrored in a novel. The story is very different from that of *The Thirteenth Tale*, yet the mystery also centers on identity and on the power of a person to create his own life. Set in Barcelona around the middle of the 20th century, the novel also concerns Spanish politics, but in some ways is primarily a coming-of-age story and a love story. The importance of books, the style and tone of the novel, and the dangerousness of reading may all appeal to readers who enjoyed *The Thirteenth Tale*.

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