

## Reading group questions for *Still Waters*

*Still Waters* is a provoking, unconventional novel daring to explore one of society's last great taboos – the idea that there are some women who are quite simply neither naturally maternal nor nurturing. Below are some questions which could be used as starting points for your reading group's discussion of some of the topical issues raised by *Still Waters*.

1. The narrator of *Still Waters* remains unnamed throughout the novel. Why do you think the author has chosen to do this? Do you think it is a successful device and if so, how and why?
2. *Still Waters* breaks from convention in the fact that its narrator is not an immediately warm or likeable woman. At any stage during the reading of *Still Waters* did you find yourself feeling sympathetic towards its narrator? If so, when did you lose sympathy for her? Did your sympathy return at any point?

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3. The narrator provides the reader with a graphic description of the birth of her first child and its aftermath, where she had trouble bonding with the baby. In your opinion do you think this failure to bond can be seen as explaining any of her subsequent actions? Do you believe that the narrator's behaviour could be attributable to post-partum depression? Why or why not?
4. Do you think the hospital should or could have been more vigilant in picking up and addressing the narrator's ambivalence towards Cassie at the time of her birth? Do you think this would have made any difference to her subsequent actions?
  - What is your experience of, and views on, the post-natal care provided by hospitals and child-health clinics?
  - What is your experience of, and views on, the support provided in our society to families in general?
5. The narrator's husband, Daniel, is an important character in *Still Waters*. To what extent do you think his actions can be seen as being either a

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contributing or driving factor behind the narrator's actions and responses throughout the novel?

- Do you think Daniel should bear any of the responsibility for what happens in the novel?
6. The narrator claims that her relationship with Daniel is similar to that between herself and her father. Do you see similarities in the relationships, particularly when taking the roles of the narrator's mother and daughter into account? Do you see differences?
7. The narrator partly blames her mother for the lack of confidence which she experiences in her own mothering abilities. Do you think this is true?
- Do you believe that the mothering instinct is innate, or do you think it has to be learned?
8. One of the images used in *Still Waters* is of a Möbius strip\*. In what way do you see the image

\* A Möbius strip is a mathematical construct which can be made by taking a flat band of material, giving it a half twist and then joining it. The resulting structure has only one side and one surface. Sometimes known as the 'eternity symbol', the Möbius strip has fascinated artists and writers since its discovery in 1858. M.C. Escher, amongst others, has used it as the basis for a number of his etched images.

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of the Möbius strip as being important to the novel? You may wish to consider this question with regard to both the nature of the narrator and the structure of the book.

9. *Still Waters* is a self-contained novel told from the point of view of the narrator and main character. To what extent do you think her story can be fully believed? Are there any points in the novel where you feel the narrator's authority as storyteller, and ultimate source of truth for the novel, is undermined? How would any such undermining affect your reading of the novel?
10. What do you think has become of the narrator by the end of *Still Waters*? Do you think it is important that the reader knows from where the narrator last speaks?
11. One of the books which the author says influenced the writing of *Still Waters* is Dr Robert Hare's book *Without Conscience: The Disturbing World of the Psychopaths Among Us*. In this book Dr Hare describes a psychopath as: someone who is capable of 'using their charm and

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chameleon-like abilities to cut a wide swath through society and leaving a wake of ruined lives behind them'. A person 'lacking in empathy and the ability to form warm emotional relationships with others...who functions without conscience'. To what extent do you view the narrator of *Still Waters* as exhibiting psychopathic-like qualities? To what extent do you think she is simply highly narcissistic?



