

“Poignant, subversive, and sure
to be a hit with book clubs.”

—SARAH PENNER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MADELINE MARTIN

THE
SECRET



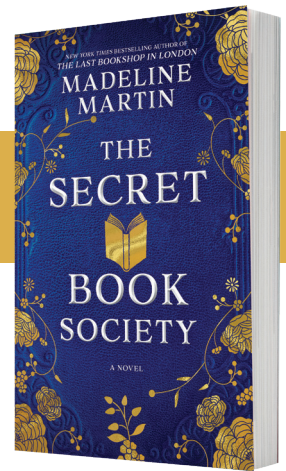
BOOK
SOCIETY

A NOVEL

BOOK
CLUB
KIT

Discussion Questions

THE SECRET BOOK SOCIETY



1. Lady Duxbury is at the center of so many rumors, particularly the claim that she murdered her three husbands. How did your opinion of her shift as you learned more about her? Do you see her as a villain, a survivor, or something in between?
2. Do you think Lady Duxbury killed her husbands? Why or why not?
3. In the novel, everyday objects—a hat pin, a teacup, a pressed flower, even the jewelry worn—take on hidden meanings or double purposes. How did these details change the way you thought about Victorian women’s lives?
4. Referring back to question 3, what modern parallels can you think of where women or marginalized groups have created subtle forms of resistance and meaning?
5. Books in the story are more than entertainment; they’re escape, inspiration and empowerment. What are some books that have been particularly impactful to you in your life?
6. Many of the characters wrestle with how society defines them versus who they really are. Which character’s struggle with identity, agency, or belonging did you find most compelling?
7. Not all the men in the novel are bad (just as not all the women are good) – who are some of the male characters who might have seemed bad that you realized were forced into their own societal constraints?
8. Hat pins and poisons were tools of both fear and empowerment. Did it surprise you that women once took lessons in self-defense using hat pins? Would you have taken hat pin self-defense classes?
9. Female friendships and solidarity are at the heart of the Secret Book Society. How does your own group support one another? What kind and encouraging things have your friends done for you?
10. The Secret Book Society is described as both a refuge and a risk. Do you think you would have joined such a group if you lived in Victorian London? Why or why not?

HISTORICAL FACTS THAT INSPIRED *THE SECRET BOOK SOCIETY*

REAL LIFE ANTI-CINDERELLA STORY: The inspiration for *The Secret Book Society* began with a real-life Victorian scandal. A wealthy woman's husband had her committed to an asylum when she disagreed with an affair he was carrying on with her niece. But in this case, she managed to bribe a boy on the street to tell her friends she was being taken to an asylum. She threw a single shoe from her carriage for the boy to use as proof of her story and identity. They came to her rescue, and she was freed.

FEMALE AUTHORS: The late Victorian period saw more women publishing under their own names and writing female protagonists who didn't conform neatly to societal expectations. Authors like the Brontë sisters, Jane Austen, and so many more challenging societal norms through their heroines and gave women hope for lives with more freedom, education, and respect.

BOOK SOCIETIES: Books and newspapers were expensive, sometimes prohibitively so. To make reading more accessible, communities formed book and newspaper societies, where members pooled resources to buy and shared reading materials. These groups became spaces for discussion, debate, and the exchange of ideas. In a world where women's voices were often silenced, such spaces were often places of refuge and empowerment.

READING: Although women were not formally banned from reading, cultural anxieties swirled around the idea of what women read. Critics feared that novels might corrupt women, fill their heads with unrealistic ideas, or distract them from their "duties" as wives and mothers. And heaven forbid they have opinions that differed from the men in their lives. In truth, reading offered women a way to imagine different lives and connect with heroines who defied the rules. Each turned page became an act of quiet defiance.

POISONS: Another fascinating undercurrent of Victorian life was the paranoia around poisoning. With substances like arsenic, laudanum, and belladonna easily accessible in homes and gardens, newspapers fed the public's fear of women secretly dosing their husbands' meals. Whether the threat was exaggerated or real, the anxiety reflected men's apparent unease.

HAT PINS: Elaborate hats were all the rage in the late 19th century, secured with long, sharp hat pins. While they began as a fashion necessity, women quickly realized they could be used as weapons of self-defense. So much so that some cities tried to regulate their length!

DOLLAR PRINCESSES: By the late 19th century, many wealthy American heiresses—nicknamed "Dollar Princesses"—crossed the Atlantic to marry titled but financially struggling British aristocrats. Their money kept estates afloat, while the young women gained titles and social standing, though often at the cost of personal freedom and happiness. In *The Secret Book Society*, Rose Wharton embodies this world, caught between privilege and the suffocating expectations of her new life in England.

HYSTERIA: In Victorian England, "hysteria" became a catch-all diagnosis for women who defied societal norms, whether through strong emotions, illness doctors couldn't explain, or simply resisting male authority. It was often used to justify institutionalizing women in asylums. In *The Secret Book Society*, the looming threat of hysteria hangs over every character, a reminder of how easily independence could be punished as madness.

BOOKS FEATURED IN THE SECRET BOOK SOCIETY:

Mansfield Park

BY JANE AUSTEN

Sense and Sensibility

BY JANE AUSTEN

The Picture of Dorian Gray

BY OSCAR WILDE

Wuthering Heights

BY EMILY BRONTË

A Masque of Poets

(ANONYMOUS AUTHORS)

Jane Eyre

BY CHARLOTTE BRONTË

The Female Quixote

BY CHARLOTTE LENNOX

The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe

Aurora Lee

BY ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING

The poetry of William Blake

Oliver Twist

BY CHARLES DICKENS

Works

BY SAMUEL TAYLOR COLERIDGE

SNACK SUGGESTIONS



TEA:

Earl Grey

A refined, classic choice

CHAMOMILE

Comforting, soothing, perfect for late-night book chat

ROSEHIP TEA

Floral, subtle, and perfect with a sweet biscuit

COFFEE

(for the American dollar princesses in the room)

SHORTBREAD

SCONES WITH JAM

SPICE CAKE

VICTORIA SPONGE

CUCUMBER SANDWICHES



MAKE YOUR OWN HIDDEN MEANING BOUQUET

In Victorian times, flowers weren't just pretty—they spoke an entire secret language. Each bloom carried meaning, whether it was a declaration of love, a whispered warning, or a message of hope.

Flowers play an important role in *The Secret Book Society* in that every flower or plant mentioned in the story has been done with purpose, and each carries a hidden meaning using what the Victorians called Floriography, or the language of flowers.

In *The Secret Book Society*, flowers add layers of symbolism and mystery—and now it's your turn to play with the language of flowers!

How to Play

Invite everyone in your book club to create their own "Secret Book Society Bouquet."

There's no wrong way to do it—use whatever feels fun and easy!

MAGAZINE COLLAGE: Flip through magazines, cut out pictures of flowers, and arrange them into a bouquet on paper. It's like Victorian scrapbooking meets modern vision-boarding.

STICKERS & WASHI TAPE: Grab some floral stickers or washi tape from a craft store and build your bouquet in a notebook or on cardstock. Low mess, high creativity.

FRESH OR FAUX FLOWERS: Stop by the grocery store and pick out a few stems, or raid your stash of faux flowers for a bouquet that lasts forever.

DIGITAL BOUQUET: For virtual clubs, have everyone find images online and share them in your group chat—bonus points if they explain why they picked each one.

MAKE YOUR OWN HIDDEN MEANING BOUQUET

The Fun Twist

When your bouquet is complete, use the floriography chart included in this guide to “decode” your flowers.

Do the meanings match your mood, your personality, or maybe even a character from the book?

Share with your club which bloom best represents you and your friends.

PRO TIP FOR HOSTS:

Put out little cards and pens so everyone can label their bouquet with the flower meanings.

It's part art project, part secret code, and part icebreaker.

There are some irregularities in various flower translations, so for the sake of consistency,

I used *Floriography* by Jessica Roux in ***The Secret Book Society***.

However, here are some generally consistent meanings:

ROSE (RED)	- Love, passion
ROSE (YELLOW)	- Friendship, joy
ROSE (PINK)	- Gratitude, admiration
VIOLET	- Faithfulness, modesty
FORGET-ME-NOT	- True love, remembrance
LILY OF THE VALLEY	- Sweetness, renewal, return of happiness
DAISY	- Innocence, new beginnings
SUNFLOWER	- Devotion, loyalty
IVY	- Friendship, fidelity, lasting bonds
OAK LEAVES	- Strength, bravery
LAVENDER	- Calm, devotion
PANSY	- Thoughts, remembrance
CARNATION (RED)	- Deep love, admiration
CARNATION (WHITE)	- Pure love, good luck
MARIGOLD	- Grief, despair
CHRYSANTHEMUM (WHITE)	- Truth, loyalty
OLEANDER	- Caution, beware
FOXGLOVE	- Insincerity, but also protection (dual meaning)
Tulips (Red)	- True love
TULIPS (YELLOW)	- Hope, cheerful thoughts
TULIPS (WHITE)	- Forgiveness, worthiness
ORCHIDS	- Elegance, strength, beauty