

THE
MADWOMEN
OF PARIS

JENNIFER
CODY
EPSTEIN

DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Did you know much about the history of hysteria and “mad” women being institutionalized in France before reading *The Madwomen of Paris*? Did anything in this lesser-known bit of history surprise you?
2. While much of the story examines women’s rights (or lack thereof) in the medical arena, Laure also at one point encounters a women’s rights advocate being arrested. How are the topics of feminism and equality represented in the story, both inside and outside the medical field? What has changed since the 1800s? What hasn’t?
3. Dr. Charcot is a real historical figure who contributed much to the medical field, particularly to modern neurology. However, as we come to find out in the novel, his methods for treating hysteria were less successful. What did you make of his methodologies for treating his patients? How culpable do you think he is for the harm his patients endured, since he truly believed he was helping them?
4. Think of the men in the novel and their behaviors towards women, especially the vulnerable women in their care. Do you think if hysteria primarily affected men instead of women, that they would have treated male patients in the same way? Do you think there are social norms of the time that contributed to the way these respected doctors viewed their patients?
5. Mental health and its treatment, particularly for women, is a key theme of the novel. How has society’s view of mental illness changed over time? How much do you think the female-oriented hysteria affected this change versus male-oriented mental health issues like shell shock?
6. Think about the line: “A friend. In this place. The idea seemed strangely fantastical.” Why do you think the women of Hysteria were so competitive with each other and reluctant to be each other’s allies? Do you think this is a result of the hospital’s practices, the time’s attitudes toward gender, or something else? Do you think this sense of competition still exists today?
7. As Laure and Josephine grow closer and learn to rely on each other, their friendship deepens into something more. What do you think it says about humanity that relationships can form and flourish even in the darkest of places? What do you think it says about Laure and Josephine’s resilience?

8. How does the theme of family present itself in the story, in both “found” family and “blood” family?
9. In the book, both Charcot and Laure’s late father consider “nervous disorders” like hysteria to be responses to the overwhelming speed of modernization and change in the late 19th century. Do you see parallels to this “modernity-induced trauma” in today’s world? How does it manifest itself today and how have attitudes towards it changed?
10. *The Madwomen of Paris* is told from the perspective of Laure, as though she is writing it several years after the events and looking back on her experiences. How does this format impact the plot? Do you think Laure is a reliable narrator, or will her own biases and hindsight have an effect on the accuracy of her tale?
11. What did you think of the twist at the end of the novel? Were you able to predict it, or did it take you by surprise? How surprised do you think the other characters were to find themselves in that situation?
12. When Laure writes her recollections about life at the Salpêtrière, she is doing so in a world that her younger self would hardly have recognized. What astonishing changes do you think she’s seen over the course of the novel’s timeline, roughly 1880 through 1930? Do those changes seem more or less remarkable than those people have witnessed over other periods?