

THE PORTRAIT OF ELOISE LECLAIR

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Book Club Discussion Guide

WARNING: CONTAINS SPOILERS!

The Portrait of Eloise Leclair weaves together multiple timelines to explore how the past continues to shape our present. Through art restorer Amelia Beckett's modern-day discoveries and the historical story of the Bourget-Vallois Alliance, the novel raises profound questions about ownership, preservation, and resistance through art.

As we discuss the book today, we'll explore these themes and how they might resonate with our own experiences. Some questions will ask us to consider larger philosophical ideas about art and cultural heritage, while others will invite us to reflect on more personal themes—family legacy, sacrifice, and the power of ordinary objects to carry extraordinary meaning.

There are no right or wrong answers here. The novel's richly layered narrative allows for multiple interpretations, and your unique perspective will add depth to our discussion. Feel free to share personal connections you made while reading, and don't hesitate to respectfully challenge or build upon others' viewpoints.

Questions

ART & OWNERSHIP

- 1) The novel wrestles with the idea of who “owns” art once it becomes part of a cultural record. Philosophically, should something as deeply cultural as art be privately owned? Or is art—especially historically significant art—always, in some sense, public property because it represents the human collective? Can an individual claim ownership of all the creativity that came before them?
- 2) Amelia realized “Ownership wasn’t about possessing something; it was about safeguarding it, nurturing it, and, when the time was right, letting it go so others could experience and learn from it.” Both timelines deal with questions of ownership - of art, of stories, of history itself. What does it mean to truly "own" something? Where does personal legacy end and public heritage begin?
- 3) Building on the novel’s theme that art is fragile yet a powerful form of resistance, we see characters like Sergei, Eloise, Arnaud, Nadejda, and Amelia each with their own reasons for preserving it. If we accept Sergei’s belief that safeguarding art is akin to safeguarding freedom itself, can art really resist oppressive forces—even if it’s hidden or unacknowledged? Or does its strength depend on being publicly recognized and collectively remembered? In your view, what makes art so potent that entire regimes fear and seek to control it—and does it truly preserve the human spirit during times of oppression, or is that just a romantic notion?
- 4) "We preserve so we can pass on what we protect." The novel presents different approaches to preservation—from Sergei's private collection to the Alliance's hidden network to modern-day museums. Each faces a central dilemma: how to balance protection with accessibility. What does the story suggest about this tension? Can art fulfill its cultural purpose if it's hidden away, or does true preservation require public engagement? What responsibilities do custodians of art have to both protect and share their collections?

SACRIFICE & ETHICS

- 5) The Alliance and other characters in the novel devote immense efforts—and even risk or pay with their lives—to preserve paintings. How does the novel handle the theme of sacrifice—both personal and cultural? Is art’s beauty alone enough to justify such risk, or does its cultural and historical significance make it morally imperative to protect it? What makes something “significant?” Where do you see the line between aesthetic appreciation and moral responsibility?

6) Several characters in the novel use secrecy and deception to safeguard treasures and protect loved ones. From a purely ethical standpoint, can secrecy be justified if it serves the “greater good,” or does it inevitably risk betraying trust? When does concealment become necessary protection versus a moral failure—and how do such decisions shape both personal relationships and the larger historical narrative?

FAMILY & LEGACY

7) The novel highlights how ancestral choices continue to shape modern lives—Arnaud, for instance, wrestles with honoring his family’s expectations versus pursuing his passion for art. In what ways can family loyalty both strengthen and stifle one’s personal identity? Where do you think we should draw the line between respecting tradition and forging our own path? In addition, when should past “sins” remain part of the family legacy we acknowledge, and when can we decide they no longer define who we are today?

8) Throughout the novel, characters inherit not just physical objects (like paintings or rings) but also emotions—regret, love, duty. Which do you think is harder to carry forward: tangible heirlooms or intangible emotional baggage? How do emotional legacies shape characters’ choices in the present?

OBJECTS & MEMORY

9) Throughout the novel, ordinary objects carry hidden secrets, deeper meanings, and personal histories that help preserve the past. What does this recurring theme of “hidden in plain sight” suggest about how we uncover truth—both personally and collectively? How do ordinary objects become extraordinary through their hidden meanings, transforming from the mundane into something sacred? Are there things in your own life or history whose deeper significance you only recognized later? What does this suggest about how history is preserved?

10) Arnaud hides Eloise’s legacy so carefully that for decades, no one knows it exists. If a person or a piece of art is forgotten by everyone, does it still hold meaning or “exist” in a philosophical sense? How do memory and recognition shape what is “real” or valuable to society?

LOVE & RELATIONSHIPS

11) The story weaves together multiple forms of love - romantic love, love of art, love of heritage, love of freedom. How do these different kinds of love motivate the characters' choices and sacrifices? Which did you find most compelling?

TIME & UNDERSTANDING

12) The story suggests that some truths can only be understood through time and distance. What does this imply about how we process historical trauma? Can some wounds only be examined through the lens of later generations?

13) How does experiencing this story through two timelines affect your connection to both past and present characters? Did you find yourself more drawn to one timeline over the other? The novel suggests that understanding the past changes how we see the present—have you experienced moments in your own life where discovering historical context shifted your perspective on current situations?

FATE & JUSTICE

14) Amelia's discovery of the hidden toolbox and Arnaud's accidental encounter with Eloise both hinge on happenstance. Do you think the novel suggests these moments are guided by fate, or are they simply chance? How do such serendipitous events influence the characters' sense of purpose or destiny? How has fate shaped your life?

15) Even after recovering and returning stolen artwork, the novel acknowledges that some wounds can't be fully healed. In your view, can the act of restitution—whether of art or of a family's memory—truly right historical wrongs? What does the novel suggest about the extent to which justice can be achieved after so much time has passed?

ADDITIONAL NOTES: