



# *PRIMA DONNA*

## Readers' Guide

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### Discussion Questions:

1. In the quotes that open the book, from Faust, Faust asks what the devil can do for her, Mephistophes says, "Everything! What is it you want?" and Marguerite tells of hearing the voice inside her heart. How do these quotes apply to Prima Donna? Why do you think the author chose them?
2. The 19th C was the dawning of the world of celebrity as we know it. Do you see similarities between the celebrity cult of the 19th C and today? What do you think would have happened to Sabine in today's world?
3. The willingness to trust our own perceptions, and to believe the truth we want to believe, is a persistent theme throughout the novel. Do you think that truth is an absolute? Whose perception of the truth do you believe is more true—Sabine's, or Gideon's? Do you believe either is lying? For what purpose?
4. What do you think of the way Sabine/Marguerite uses her sexuality to get what she wants? Do you believe Gideon was the pimp she's accuses him of being? Do you agree with Barret when he says there are other ways for her to get what she wants, or given the times and her goals, do you think Sabine has any other choice? How do you think this relates to today's world? Are there similarities/parallels to be drawn?
5. Do you think Sabine's behavior toward Barret is justified? Toward Willa? Johnny and Charlotte? Gideon? Do you think her actions immoral? In what sense?
6. How much responsibility should Sabine take for who she is? Is she right to blame much of her behavior on Gideon? What part did her family play in what she became? Do you think Barret should bear any blame?
7. Do you think Gideon deliberately tried to control Sabine? How so? Who do you think is most in control in the relationship between Sabine and Gideon?

8. In one scene, Gideon forces Sabine to reexamine the truth about her brother. Do you think it is the truth? What do you think was Gideon and Barret's relationship? Do you believe Gideon when he says that he tried to save Barret? Or do you believe he was, as Barret claimed, trying to come between Barret and Sabine?

9. What role do you believe Johnny and Charlotte played in Marguerite/Sabine's redemption? Do you believe she truly cared for them?

10. Both Gideon and Charlotte tell Sabine she can change. Do you think she will? Do you believe it's possible for a person to change in adulthood? Do you believe Sing-Sing truly changed Gideon, as Charlotte claimed?

11. Do you agree with Sabine when she says that she and Gideon aren't good for each other? Do you think Barret was right when he said Gideon brought out the worst in Sabine?

12. Gideon tells Sabine that he believes Alain deserved what she did to him. Do you agree that her murder of Alain was justified? Why or why not? How do you feel about Gideon's sacrifice in going to prison for her?

13. Do you think Gideon truly loves Sabine, or simply means to use her? What about Sabine—do you believe her love for Gideon is real?

14. Do you feel Sabine made the right decision in returning to Gideon? Do you think their relationship will be different in the future? How do you see their lives together unfolding?

## **Author Interview:**

*What was the inspiration for Prima Donna?*

Inspiration comes from many places, but in the case of *Prima Donna*, ironically enough, it began with a song. Somehow, in the changeover from vinyl to cds, I'd never got around to updating my collection of one of my favorite bands, The Pretenders. When my husband bought me a cd of their greatest hits for Christmas, I was flung back into the past. One song I'd always particularly loved was "Back on the Chaingang," but this time, when I listened to the lyrics, about two people who were torn apart, it spurred a story idea. I began to ask questions: who were these people? What happened to them? Those questions began to coalesce into a story, and one that seemed perfect for a structure I'd recently become interested in—the dual storyline I'd read in books like *Shadow of the Wind* and *The Thirteenth Tale*. But those books told the stories of two people, and I wondered how such a structure would work in telling the story of a single person and a defining moment of disaster that split that person's life into a distinct before and after—like "Back on the Chaingang"—and I liked the challenge of utilizing the past to create change in the present.

After that, it was just a matter of finding the characters who fit the story (which was no mean feat—and Interpol’s song, “The Scale,” with its chorus of “I made you, and now I take you back” was hugely influential in developing the character of Gideon). I knew I needed someone hiding from the world, and that meant the main character had to be someone known in the world, which meant she had to be a celebrity, and therefore, an opera singer.

### *Why opera?*

The 19th century was the beginning of the cult of celebrity as we know it today. Much of that was due to the industrial revolution, which changed several things: it eliminated a lot of painstaking and time-intensive labor and therefore gave people more free time to spend on entertainment and pleasure; it created a level of prosperity where people suddenly had some disposable income; and as religion began to lose its stranglehold on morality, its disapproval of entertainment for entertainment’s sake was no longer so influential. Even so, there were relatively few ways for a woman to be as famous as I needed the character of Sabine to be. In this period, there were famous actresses, but acting and theater still bore the faint stain of immorality laid upon it by the church. The real female celebrities in the 19th C were opera stars. They gave away cards of their likenesses—the *carte de visites* that became the precursor of today’s trading cards—and they were feted and adored. Their lives became fodder for public consumption. The devotion bestowed upon women celebrities like Adelina Patti and her sister, Carlotta, Jenny Lind, Pauline Lucca and Christine Nilsson gave them a level of freedom that had never quite existed before. Adelina Patti, for example, was famous for having an affair with a tenor while she was married to someone else. Women at the highest reaches of society shunned her and didn’t accept her, but it made relatively little difference. Her performances still drew crowds, and she remained a much-coveted guest at suppers and dances.

That combination of freedom and censure was what I was looking for, and because the plot required that the character of Sabine be nationally known and—more importantly—loved, I had few choices for her profession beyond opera.

### *What resources did you use in researching Prima Donna?*

Once I’d determined that I needed my characters to be immersed in the world of opera, I had a small problem: I had virtually no knowledge of that world. I’d been to one opera in my life—in high school, when my class attended a shortened version of *Der Ring Des Nibelungen*. So I threw myself into researching 19th C opera, which included listening to as much of it as I could. Much to my surprise, I was completely mesmerized by it. The stories oozing with melodrama, the sublime voices full of pathos or joy, the music ... it was much more than I expected, and it appealed greatly to my sensibility. It’s been more than a year since I finished researching Prima Donna, but I’m still listening to opera every day, which is stunning given that I am and have always been an alternative music lover—I even sang in a punk rock band in college. Because I had some music and voice training as a teenager, I have some understanding of the difficulty of what opera singers do, and I’m constantly amazed by it. I’m still a neophyte; there are so many operas I haven’t yet seen or heard. But I’m still listening, and this last year I attended my first live operas

as an adult, and, as my local cinema has just begun broadcasting operas from the MET in HD, I'm planning to be there as often as possible.

Some books I can recommend for anyone wanting to get into opera are Renee Fleming's *The Inner Voice*, and the excellent book by Peter Fox Smith called *A Passion for Opera*.

*Prima Donna is set both in New York City and Seattle. Although you've set novels in New York before, Seattle is a new setting for you. Why did you choose it?*

The short answer is because I live there. I realized that I had never set a book in western Washington, where I've resided now for most of my life, and that seemed odd. Part of the reason is because the region was so recently settled—Seattle wasn't even founded until the early 1850s—and for many years it was little more than a village peopled by settlers and native Americans. I tend to prefer the middle 19th C as a time period, and Seattle was essentially non-existent at that time. But this book required an escape to a faraway and relatively unknown location, and frankly, Seattle would have been the last place on earth where anyone would have thought to look for someone like Sabine Conrad, which suited the plot. Besides that, Seattle had two advantages: first, the story was set late enough that Seattle was a thriving town, and one struggling to find its identity and rife with conflict of its own, and second, I know Seattle intimately—I knew how the air felt and tasted and the native plants and the views. It simply felt time to write a story set at least partly in a city I love.

*Is Sabine Conrad based on any real person?*

No. There are aspects of Sabine's character that were influenced by real people. For example, the incident in San Francisco, where her fans unhitched the horses to draw her carriage themselves, really happened to the famous prima donna Adelina Patti, and there were other aspects to Sabine's fame that were drawn from the experiences of Patti, Mary Garden, Evelyn Nesbit and other famous women of the period. Other than that, Sabine is a product of my imagination.

*In Sabine, you create a not always sympathetic character who controls through her sexuality. Why did you make this choice?*

Women with power and ambition are often portrayed as un-sympathetic or as somehow unnatural—even today. But there have always been ambitious women with talents they longed to pursue other than privately, and until fairly recently, those women were kept firmly in their place. I believe that a woman may exist for other reasons than home and family, and I wanted to examine what would happen to a fiercely ambitious woman in the 19th c., when she is so firmly going against the norm. How could a woman like that find power in such an unequal world? She would be forced to use whatever means she could, and too often, even today, the most effective tool for a woman would be her sexuality.

This raised all sorts of interesting questions: How is a woman like that perceived? How is she taken advantage of? How is she controlled by the men in her life? What happens to her when she attempts to take power for her own, and is there something immoral in that? Why do we judge

women like that so much more harshly than we judge men? And what if an ambitious woman does become a monster? Who's responsible for that?

*Like your previous novel, The Spiritualist, Prima Donna deals thematically with truth and perception. What is it that fascinates you so much about this theme?*

I do love the contradictions inherent in any discussion of truth. You're right in that it's a theme that runs persistently through my work, and it's one of the reasons I choose to work with such a limiting pov (1st person), because I enjoy exploring the limits imposed upon us by our own perceptions. One of the reasons I find that exploration so interesting is because of its relevance to my own life. I happen to have a very good long term memory—I remember things that happened to me when I was a baby. Because my memory is so good, I've relied on it more than I should have, and often been stunned and dismayed when it becomes clear that the truth I remember is not really the truth at all—or at least not wholly the truth, and sometimes not even that. Our perceptions are shaped by who we are and what we've experienced, and so how can any of us really know what the truth is? Why do we even pretend it's absolute?

In storytelling terms, the idea that truth changes depending on the viewer is as a compelling arena for conflict as it is in real life.