



THE VISITANT

Readers' Guide

Lake Union Publishing

339 pages

\$14.95

ISBN 978-1503945173

Discussion Questions:

- 1) Do you believe in ghosts? If you do, why do you think they exist?
- 2) Do you believe that possession by a spirit is possible? Elena has difficulty determining whether Samuel's affliction is madness or something otherworldly. Do you think people in today's world could tell the difference? Do you think we would ever consider the possibility of a paranormal cause?
- 3) In the 19th century, epilepsy was something to shun, and thought to be caused by licentious behavior. Scientific research has changed the way we think of it, but do you think people still have a viscerally negative response toward it? Do you think there are other such aberrations/abnormalities that we view in that same light today?
- 4) Samuel does not want the "normal" life his parents wish to provide for him. Elena cannot understand why. Do you? If you were afflicted as he is, would you want a normal life, or would you choose otherwise, as he does?
- 5) Elena thinks of her life as a narrow room with no doors. Women of that time were severely constricted in their choices, but do you see parallels with women's lives today? How so? In what ways do modern women find themselves in "narrow rooms?"
- 6) Nerone asks Elena to save him, and "saving" is a theme in the book. Elena tries to save herself, her family, and Samuel. Do you think it possible to save someone from who they are?
- 7) Elena despairs at not being able to see the truth of Samuel or Nero. Do you think we can know the truth of anyone? We depend on our ability to "read" people. How accurate do you think we are?
- 8) Elena is ashamed of her reaction to the pornography that Samuel gives her to read. She worries over the wantonness of her character and feels guilty for liking it. Do you think women today still have the same concerns? Why do you think that is so?

9) In chapter 29, Elena states that the house has done nothing but wish her ill from the moment she stepped into it. Do you think places can do that? Do you believe that the history of a place can inform the lives of those who live within it, whether or not they know that history?

10) In desperation, Elena, Nerone and Samuel decide to allow an exorcism rite. Would you ever consider such a thing? Why or why not?

11) Nero asks if everyone hides secrets. Do you think we do? If so, why do you believe that's true? What motivates us to hide certain aspects of ourselves?

Author Interview:

What inspired The Visitant?

While I was researching *Inamorata*, I was reading a lot of fiction set in Venice, just to get a feel for the place. Henry James' *The Aspern Papers*, Wilkie Collins *The Haunted Hotel*, Vernon Lee's ghost stories are some examples. It was while reading Vernon Lee's "Amore Dure" that I realized I wanted to try writing a ghost story. Over the last few novels, I've definitely taken a bit of a turn toward the supernatural. Part of the reason is that I find myself growing more interested in the things we can't see that influence us, and the psychological impact of experiences we can't explain. I'd never written a ghost story before, but Venice seemed the perfect place to set one—there's something about a city built upon water that makes it fluid and shape-shifting. The way light plays upon it, the labyrinthine nature of it, and the fact that it's half made up of reflections, so you never quite have a grasp of where you are, means that it lends itself quite naturally to the half-seen and the unseen. Venice has a very long history, and its role as the marketplace/trading center/decadent playground of the world for centuries means there are many, many different influences there, and a lot of ghosts, legends and superstitions. Even its decay is artistic and inspiring. All those things seem to point one naturally toward things that go bump in the night.

What kind of research did you do for this novel?

Prior to *Inamorata*, my novels had all been set in America. Cities here are comparatively young, and Americans seem to have an aversion to tradition, so these cities are always remaking themselves, and you have to use old maps to get a sense of where things were in the 19th Century and how they looked. It's very different to research a city several centuries old that has remained essentially unchanged. The view from the Salute is pretty much the same it has always been. The other fortunate aspect of researching Venice is that it was one of the obligatory stops people made on their Grand Tours, and there are journals, travel guides, and articles everywhere on what they saw and how they felt about it, and after reading many, many of those, and inhaling those impressions as well as viewing photographs and videos, I felt I had a real sense of what the city was like and how it felt to be there. Lord Byron, who wrote *Don Juan* there, and who found

the city both fascinating and deadly, was a great resource, as was William Dean Howells, who was the American Ambassador there for a time, and whose journal of his stay is really wonderful.

Tell us about the characters in The Visitant

One of my primary interests as a writer is women's history. I'm interested in the doors that were closed to women in previous times, and how they managed their lives around those doors—or didn't. Elena is very much one of those women. She was raised by a father who nurtured her mind and taught her to be his assistant as well as his best asset, and so she did have an expectation of an intellectually rewarding life, if not a passionate one. When she makes a mistake, she finds—to her dismay—what feet of clay her father actually has, and suddenly Elena's life is not so free as she imagined. Samuel Farber is a patient who has spent some time in the asylum where Elena worked with her father, and so he reminds Elena very much of the life she once thought would be hers forever. He also is like most of the men she knows, and so he's familiar in that way. He is also a constant challenge, and far more honest than she wants him to be. Nerone Basilio is a romantic, passionate man of a kind she's never met before. She is inexperienced and barely understands her own longings, and Nero forces her to acknowledge a part of herself she's unfamiliar with and afraid of. Both men push her in ways she's never been pushed before. Their different responses to the strange events in the Basilio also means that Elena must, for once in her life, think on her own and rely on her own instincts and intellect. *The Visitant* is, in many ways, a coming of age story.

How much of this strange, creepy story was planned? Did you plot it out in detail from the start, or did it just unfold as you wrote it?

As I said earlier, I knew I wanted to write a ghost story, and I knew that I wanted a *Jane Eyre* meets "Amore Dure" feel, but the story took many, many forms before finally—at draft four or five—I threw everything out and started over. I think the only thing I kept were the character names. Once I decided to do that however, I sat down and planned the story out pretty thoroughly, but for me all that means is that I know where I'm going, not how I'm going to get there. In the end, it doesn't matter how well you plan a story; it always takes twists and turns you never expect, and this one was no exception. Thankfully, my subconscious always knows what I'm doing better than I do.

What do you hope readers will take away from The Visitant?

Thematically, I think *The Visitant* is about responsibility and consequences. These three people are being forced to grow up and deal with the impact of their actions. That it's something otherworldly that forces them to come to terms with reality was a fun little ironic twist.