



A DROP OF INK Readers' Guide

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Discussion Questions:

- 1) The quote that opens the book is from Byron and speaks to man's passions being like meteors. How do you think each of the characters in the book inhabit that quote? Which passion does each of them follow and how does it destroy/redeem them?
- 2) Society and gossip have defined the lives of nearly all those in the villa, and has in fact forced them into exile. People who do not know them judge them harshly, and that harsh judgment has created immense hardship for them all. Do you feel that they deserve society's condemnation? How do you feel about the public's willingness to tear down a celebrity, and /or to make judgments based on the flimsiest knowledge? Do you feel it justified?
- 3) Louisa and Adelaide have grown up sharing everything. Vanni thinks of them as doppelgangers, and believes they are linked inextricably to one another. Is their co-dependency a curse or a blessing?
- 4) Julian sees spirits, and believes in something called the Realm of the Poets, where inspiration dwells. Do you believe as Vanni does—that these are simply hallucinations caused by laudanum—or do you believe as Louisa and Adelaide do, that there is something to these visions? Do you think spirits exist? Do you think there are those who can see them?
- 5) At one point, Adelaide asks Vanni, "Do you ever wonder what life would be like if you did what you wanted and cared nothing for anyone else?" Vanni replies that he's never wanted something that the people he loved didn't want for him. She tells him he's lucky. Do you agree? Do you believe him? Adelaide says she would like to pursue something just for herself. Do you believe, as she does, that doing so would hurt others? Does that matter? Should it?
- 6) The idea of imposture—of not being what we seem, or of being both one thing and another—doppelgangers—is a recurring theme throughout the book. How do you think this applies to each character? To the setting?

- 7) Vanni piggybacks his story on Bayard's snippet. Do you think this is "true" art? Do you think originality can or should springboard from someone else's work?
- 8) When Vanni tells Adelaide of the story that inspired him to be a writer, she replies "But it only changed you, not the world." What do you think of this statement? Do you think it true? Which is more important: individual change or changing the world?
- 9) We allow artists a great deal of leeway, and excuse all manner of bad behavior in the name of art. Should we? Do you think that creativity feeds on the aberrant? Are artists "different"? Would being the "same" hamper creativity, or is that just an excuse? Would we think less of an artist if he wasn't "different"?
- 10) Adelaide is harsh when she talks about the role of women in society, and how they are judged if they veer at all from the norm. In this time period, women had no way to support themselves beyond marriage, or family, but how are these same things true today? What comparisons can you make between women's lives now, and those of Adelaide and Louisa in 1874?
- 11) Julian wants a better world, and is willing to face ridicule and exile to make that happen. Do you think the sacrifices he asks of those who love him worth it? Do you think he's right to live his precepts without worrying how they impact others? Do you think his lofty aspirations make up for his flaws? Do you think he could have changed the world?
- 12) Do you agree with Louisa's assessment that Adelaide thinks of Vanni as an imaginary friend, that she does not see him as something real? Do you think, given what he inspired for her, that such a view of someone is wrong?
- 13) Adelaide muses that Julian meant to change the world. She wonders about her part in his death, and what she owes and to whom when he dies without living up to his promise. Do you think Adelaide has a debt to pay? What role do you believe a muse plays in the life of an artist, and how important is it? Do you believe an artist has an obligation to his/her muse? Do you believe that a muse has a responsibility to art or the artist? Do you believe a muse has a responsibility to the world?
- 14) Adelaide believes she is under a curse, and asks Vanni if he believes in them. Do you believe in curses? Do you think she was under one—either real or metaphorical? Vanni believes curses are shame, guilt and regret. Do you agree, or do you think them something more?
- 15) What do you think of Adelaide's cruelty in terms of the way she treated Julian? Emily Estes? Vanni? Louisa?

Author Interview:

What Inspired A Drop of Ink?

When I was thirteen, I discovered that *Frankenstein* was conceived during the summer of 1816, when Mary Shelley; her stepsister, Claire Clairmont; and Percy Shelley visited Lord Byron and Byron's doctor, John Polidori, at the Villa Diodati on the shores of Lac Lemman (Lake Geneva). One night, after reading ghost stories, they challenged each other to write one, and that contest inspired not just *Frankenstein*, but John Polidori's *The Vampyre*—the first tale to depict the vampire as an urbane, sexually attractive being. Since I learned of it, that summer has been a fascination—in fact, you could call it a lifelong obsession. Byron said that summer on the lake was filled with “metaphysics, mountains, lakes, love unextinguishable, thoughts unutterable...” and that only hints at the conflicts and tangled relationships and emotions in the Diodati—relationships which radically impacted not only literature, but all those involved.

I've always wanted to do a story that explored that summer in some way. Over the years, I've come up with various ideas—all of which were either nixed by me or by my agent or editor—and I put the story on hold. Sometimes an idea doesn't gel, and it requires rumination. This story has been ruminating for a very long time. Then, one late night, as I was driving home, Billy Idol's song “White Wedding” came on the radio. This is a song I've always loved, but suddenly it took on a new meaning. “*Hey little sister, what have you done?*” For whatever reason (*why that song? Why now?*—believe me, I cannot even begin to understand the workings of my own mind), the entire story fell into place. I knew exactly how to approach it. I feel as if I've been refining and researching this book in some form or another nearly the whole of my life.

Tell us about the characters

A Drop of Ink is a reimagining of that 1816 summer at Diodati, set some sixty years later. The characters are not just inspired by the five people who were in the house that summer, but are also their fictional counterparts. Though I've read almost everything I can find on that summer and those people, I have an aversion to writing real-life characters. As a historian, I feel a binding obligation to write not only what really happened, but also to be true to motivations and emotions that may be impossible for me to know. As a novelist, I feel hampered and stifled by those impossibilities and by the strictures of reality. Sometimes real life doesn't supply plot or narrative drive in a way that fiction demands. Writing a real-life person as a secondary character is one thing; to craft an entire novel around five of them was daunting enough, and restrictive enough, that it effectively kept me from writing the story for years. These people in particular are personages for whom I have enormous respect, and I did not want to in any way lessen who they were or what they contributed to the world. Not only that, but the story of that summer is a quiet one, and does not actually lend itself very well to dramatic fiction. I wanted the space to explore the emotions between these people in new and unexpected ways. So I used those relationships more as a template to explore what interested me: what does it mean to be a muse at the expense of one's own creative talents? What role does professional jealousy play in creation? How do the emotions in the epigraph that starts the novel—love, fame, ambition, and avarice—motivate, challenge and inspire these people?

While I wanted the freedom to play with all that, I also wanted the ghosts of those writers who spent the summer in the Diodati to inhabit and influence the decisions the characters in my story make. The ghosts in this story are purely metaphorical, but the characters in *A Drop of Ink* are

well aware of the history of the house—in fact, it's why they're there. Bayard Sonnier, a novelist who is dealing with an uncomfortable level of fame, is Lord Byron's counterpart, and like Byron, who was one of the world's first modern celebrities, Bayard is capricious, charming and arrogant. Julian Estes, a poet, atheist, Free-Lover, and humanist who yearns to change the world—and who is also a bit mad—is inspired by Percy Shelley. Adelaide Wentworth is Julian's muse and lover, and is struggling to define both herself and her role. She and her sister, Louisa, who has pursued Bayard from London to Lake Geneva, are based on Mary Shelley and her stepsister, Claire Clairmont. And finally, Giovanni Calina, Bayard's secretary, a man who yearns for literary recognition of his own, plays the role of Byron's doctor, John Polidori. I really loved moving these characters around my game board.

What drew you to this place/time?

Honestly I'd been hoping to move back to America after *Inamorata* and *The Visitant*, which are both set in Venice. Getting away from an American setting for those two books was very rejuvenating, and I was ready to return to the U.S. But then ... see question #1. I don't always—almost never—have any control over my subconscious, nor am I fully able to control what my mind tells me it wants to do next. When the right idea grabs hold, it simply won't let go. Thus: Geneva, and the French side of its eponymous lake.

At this period of time, as well, more and more tourists were discovering the lake and the mountain climbs from Chamonix, and there was a wealth of information about getting around Geneva and its environs. Also, transportation in this period had improved enough that it really helped in terms of plot. The 1870s are one of my favorite periods because there were just enough advances to be interesting, while many aspects of life were still very much clinging to the past.

What research did you do?

There were plenty of guidebooks from this period online. Steamer time tables, hotel prices and menus, transportation schedules—all of this was readily available. Also, this was a period where many more Americans and British were adding Switzerland and its mountain tours and stunning lakes to their itinerary, and then writing and publishing articles about their adventures. Reading these really brought the place alive for me.

In terms of Byron, Shelley, Mary Shelley, Claire Clairmont and John Polidori—there have been many books written on the first three especially. I read the personal journals of all five, as well as those written by people who knew them. Byron's letters, edited by Leslie Marchand (Vol 1-12), *The Life of Byron* by Thomas Moore, the really excellent *Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame*, by Benita Eisler, Richard Holmes' *Shelley: The Pursuit*, Charlotte Gordon's *Romantic Outlaws*, David Ellis' *Byron in Geneva*, and Mary Shelley's *History of a Six-Week Tour* were among the most helpful sources.

What do you hope readers will take away from it?

I find—as always—the juxtaposition between who we seem to be and who we are a curious and enthralling dichotomy. In *A Drop of Ink*, I really wanted to explore the way that disparity motivates and challenges us, especially when it comes to inspiration, and even more particularly, how it has impacted women throughout history. *A Drop of Ink* is a story about inspiration, but I hope it also reminds readers of the battles that women fought—and continue to fight—to determine their own lives. As Vanni says in the book: “I don’t think we can truly know the impact we might have on anyone.” Imagine a world in which *Frankenstein* did not exist. Suppressing and silencing any human soul hurts every one of us.