

Discussion Guide

BY THE BOOK

by Amanda Sellet



9780358156611 • HC

About the Book

Mary Porter-Malcolm has prepared for high school in the one way she knows how: an extensive review of classic literature to help navigate the friendships, romantic liaisons, and overall drama she has come to expect from such an “esteemed” institution. When some new friends seem in danger of falling for the same tricks employed since the days of Austen and Tolstoy, Mary swoops in to create the Scoundrel Survival Guide, using archetypes of literature’s debonair bad boys to signal red flags. But despite her best efforts, she soon finds herself unable to listen to her own good advice and falling for a supposed cad—the same one she warned her friends away from. Without a rain-swept moor to flee to, Mary must admit that real life doesn’t follow the same rules as fiction and that if she wants a happy ending, she’s going to have to write it herself.

About the Author

Debut author Amanda Sellet had a previous career in journalism, during which she wrote book reviews for the *Washington Post*, personal essays for NPR, and music and movie coverage for VH1. She has an MA in Cinema Studies from NYU and spent a year in England as au pair to an actress who has played in her share of period dramas. These days she lives in Kansas with her archaeologist husband and their daughter.

Discussion Questions

1. Mary Porter-Malcolm spends a lot of time quoting classic novels. Do you think it’s a good idea to take life advice from fiction? Why or why not?
2. Can stories written hundreds of years ago still have something to say to young people today, even if the authors wouldn’t know an app from an aardvark?
3. Have you ever met someone in real life who reminded you of a fictional character? If so, did it have more to do with their appearance or their actions? Is there a book or movie character you’d like to emulate?
4. How do you decide what constitutes “good” behavior? Which sources are you most likely to consult when developing your own moral code? Family members? Religious leaders? Politicians? Celebrities? Friends? Novelists living or dead? The YouTuber du jour?
5. Early on, Mary’s friend Lydia points out that many aspects of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century society were, shall we say, less than awesome, especially for women. How has the world changed for women and people of color since the days of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens? What forms of legal, educational, or economic inequality persist today?
6. Sometimes Mary wishes the modern world was a little more like the past, at least in terms of manners. Are there any aspects of old-fashioned life you think you might enjoy, or does it sound like a nightmare to live in a time before Netflix?
7. What makes a work of art a “classic”? Who decides? What recent books, movies, or songs do you think will become the classics of the future?
8. Is there still value in reading older novels and plays, or is it better to focus on contemporary works? What might we learn from stories written centuries ago? How about the music, painting, fashion, or architecture of previous eras?

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9. A lot of the novels Mary mentions have sad endings. Are stories that end in tragedy more realistic or just downers? Can funny books also have deeper meanings?
10. Like the books she adores, Mary has a sophisticated vocabulary. Choose one word or phrase from the text that was unfamiliar to you and share the definition, as well as a modern synonym. How has the use of language, whether written or spoken, changed over time? Can you think of reasons for that shift?
11. At the end of the book, an appendix provides somewhat silly plot summaries for a number of nineteenth-century novels. Try giving a quick rundown of a contemporary story (whether for a book, movie, TV show, or song) in the style of the Scoundrel Survival Guide.
12. A recurring theme in classic novels are the economic and/or class disparities among characters. Are there class differences between Mary and her friends? If so, how are they revealed in the text?
13. If you had to choose a classic story to retell in a modern setting, which would it be and why?
14. Name a lesson Mary learned from real life, not from reading old books.
15. At one point, Mary's little brother suggests she solve her problems by asking herself, WWJAD (What Would Jane Austen Do?). If you had to choose one artist, living or dead for your own WW___D? who would it be? What kind of rules for living would they impart?
16. Bonus question, in two parts: If you had a bookstore, what would it be named? What sort of snacks would be on the menu?