



FLATIRON  
BOOKS  
NEW YORK

# *Maddalena and the Dark*

## Reading Group Guide

Welcome to the Reading Group Guide for *Maddalena and the Dark*. Please note: In order to provide reading groups with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal important aspects of the plot of this novel—as well as the ending. If you have not finished reading *Maddalena and the Dark*, we respectfully suggest that you may want to wait before reviewing this guide.

1. Discuss the title. What do you think “the dark” refers to? Did your understanding of the title shift over the course of the novel? If so, how?
2. The narration alternates between Maddalena’s and Luisa’s perspectives. How do the girls’ styles and worldviews differ? Were you more sympathetic toward one than the other? If so, why?
3. In the novel’s opening scene, Maddalena explains the Festa della Sensa, an annual ceremony where the city and the sea are symbolically married, to Luisa. Luisa asks, “Does the doge love the water, or is he afraid?” Maddalena responds, “There is no *or*” (p. 2). What does she mean? What is the significance of that ceremony in Maddalena and Luisa’s story? What special power does water hold in this novel?
4. The first time Maddalena encounters the “thing” in the water, it asks her: “*What do you want? What will you pay for it?*” (p. 14). What is Maddalena’s answer, and how does it change as the story progresses? What about Luisa’s? How much agency do you think Luisa has as a participant in the bargain?
5. Maddalena and Luisa seem to be immediately drawn to each other at the Pietà. Why do you think that is? How are they similar to and different from each other? How do their lives change when they meet?
6. How do you understand the boundary between friendship and something more romantic in Maddalena and Luisa’s relationship? How do they interpret their relationship differently? What do you think makes the bonds between teenage girls so frequently fraught and passionate?
7. What roles do religion and religious ritual play in Maddalena’s and Luisa’s lives? How do they shape the girls’ views of the bargain they make and its consequences? How do you interpret the supernatural powers in the story?

8. How do you understand the character of the gondolier? What is Maddalena's relationship with him? What influence does he have over Maddalena's and Luisa's lives?
9. How is Venice itself depicted in this novel? Was there anything about the portrait that surprised you, either based on your own experiences or preconceived notions you might have had? If so, discuss.
10. Maddalena struggles to escape the shadow of her mother's scandal. In what ways is Maddalena shaped by her mother's choices? What expectations are placed on Maddalena as a girl, especially compared to her brothers, and how does she both chafe against and conform to those expectations?
11. Why is marriage so important to Maddalena and Luisa? What freedoms does it offer, and what sacrifices does it require?
12. In choosing marriage over the Coro, Luisa must give up public performance. In justifying this to herself, she reflects, "Wouldn't it be better to play for one man, who will not be disappointed? Wouldn't it be better to play just for Nicolò?" (p. 196). Ultimately, she realizes that she misses performance so much that she'll risk her reputation for it. Discuss her relationship to performance, and how that aspect fits into her larger passion for music. Is there an example from your own life where you feel a push and pull between private enjoyment of something and sharing it in a more public way?
13. What role does class play in the novel, specifically in Maddalena and Luisa's relationship? How do institutions like the Pietà and the Coro offer a way to shift one's social status? Is that portrayed as a positive development in this story? How does social class in eighteenth-century Venice compare to class systems today?
14. Why doesn't Luisa tell Maddalena about her affair with Nicolò? Do you sympathize with her decision? Why can't Maddalena forgive her?
15. In the novel's final pages, Maddalena describes her murder of Luisa as "a way to say goodbye to Maddalena of old" (p. 287). What do you think she means? How do you understand her actions? In sacrificing Luisa, what does Maddalena gain and lose? Do you see her final decision as inevitable?