



Love in the Asylum

By Lisa Carey
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Introduction

Alba Elliott is tired of being crazy. In and out of Abenaki Mental Hospital more than a dozen times in ten years, and fed up with diagnoses that come without cures and a life organized by a days-of-the-week pill case, the 25-year-old children's book writer is waiting for a miracle.

Oscar Jameson, a 30-year-old drug addict, is not looking for anything so profound. Oscar doesn't believe he has a problem, and resents the counselors, the other addicts, and his brother, all of whom insist he belongs there. The only activities Oscar looks forward to are the spirited, sarcastic conversations that have begun with Alba on the hospital lawn.

Then one day, in the back pages of a hospital library book, Alba finds a letter written 70 years earlier but never sent. Mary Doherty, who was committed by her husband and taken from her children, left behind secret missives about the atrocities done to her and her belief in an ancient healing power. As Alba pieces together Mary's heartbreaking chronicle, she begins to set her hopes on a different kind of medicine.

Questions for Discussion

1. What images did you have of Abenaki Hospital and its grounds? What connection does the hospital have with healing performed by the Abenaki Indians?
2. Who is Alba Elliott and how has she come to reside at Abenaki Hospital? How would you describe her emotional and mental state at the start of the novel?
3. What brings Oscar Jameson to Abenaki? How does he first meet Alba? How would you characterize their relationship from the beginning? How does their relationship change over the course of the novel?
4. How does Alba feel about drug addiction versus mental illness? For the characters of *Love in the Asylum*, is there an illness hierarchy?
5. Who is Mary Doherty, and why is she confined to Saint Dymphna's Asylum? What parallels did you see between Mary Doherty's experience of being separated from her son, Peter, and Alba's frustration at not getting to know her son? How does Mary channel her past, and how does this experience help her and the other women at the asylum?
6. In what ways is the field trip to the fair a pivotal moment in Alba and Oscar's relationship? What happens to each of them at the fair, and how does it affect them?
7. Discuss the family relationships in **Love in the Asylum**. What were some of the difficult family circumstances that Alba and Oscar had to cope with? To what extent do you think those difficulties were connected to their physical and emotional conditions?
8. Why does Alba go to such lengths to seek out Peter Doherty? What role does he play in her life? Is meeting Peter as important to Alba as meeting her son?
9. Where does Oscar and his brother David find Alba when she attempts suicide? What is significant about the location she has chosen? How does Alba react when she is discovered?
10. How did you interpret the end of **Love in the Asylum**? What future do you see for Alba and Oscar?

About the Author

Lisa Carey wrote her debut novel, **The Mermaids Singing**, while working toward her M.F.A. at Vermont College. Her book has since been translated into seven languages and optioned for film, as has her second novel, **In the Country of the Young**. Ms. Carey lived in Ireland for five years and now resides in Portland, Maine, with her husband and their Irish-immigrant dog.