



An Impartial Witness

By Charles Todd
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Questions for Discussion

1. Describe Bess Crawford. Is she a woman of her times or is she ahead of it? How did growing up in India and being the daughter of a soldier's colonel in the British army shape who she is?
2. Talk about Bess's work as a nurse. How do her duties with the wounded and dying color her outlook on the world and the war? Could you do what she does or might it be too emotionally difficult? Does Bess get overly involved with her patients? What are the benefits of becoming attached to those you care for? Are there downsides?
3. How does Bess transform from an "Impartial Witness" to a killer's prey? How does she piece together the truth about the crimes that take place in the novel? What makes Bess a great amateur sleuth?
4. Marjorie Evanson, the victim, was devoted to her pilot husband, yet she was unfaithful. What propels wives, especially those married to soldiers during wartime, to cheat? As you learned the identity of the killer and gleaned insight into his character, do you think Marjorie was less to blame for her transgressions? What if Marjorie were the wife of a soldier serving in Afghanistan today would she be viewed differently in the eyes of society?
5. What is Bess's relationship to her father's right hand man, Simon Brandon? How does he help her in her enquiries?
6. Why does Bess fight so strongly for Michael Hart, Marjorie's friend? What makes her believe in him?
7. Bess worries that once Inspector Herbert from Scotland Yard charged someone, that he would look no further to find the whole truth. "I stood there thinking to myself that he was a fair man, but like many fair men, once he'd made up his mind, he wasn't likely to find any reason to change it." Do you agree with her sentiments? Do you think a number of innocent people are convicted because the police and the prosecutor are blinded by their own certainty? Offer some examples you might know of from our own time.
8. Michael appreciates that Bess seems to understand Marjorie's plight and her emotions before she was killed. She reminds him that his friend was not the only person to fall from grace. "Three years of war had had other costs besides the long lists of dead and wounded." What are some of the other costs of war? How does war change people's soldier and civilian alike?
9. While on duty at the front, Bess's hospital receives a number of enemy soldiers. Some of the British nurses refuse to treat the Germans, but Bess does. Why? Would you?
10. The mother and son writing team of Charles Todd are noted for their meticulous attention to historical detail and evocative atmosphere. How would you compare post-Victorian English society with our own. What has changed? What is similar? What are your impressions of the war from reading the novel?