

Reading Guide

The Woman in the Photo

William Morrow Paperbacks

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Introduction

About the Book

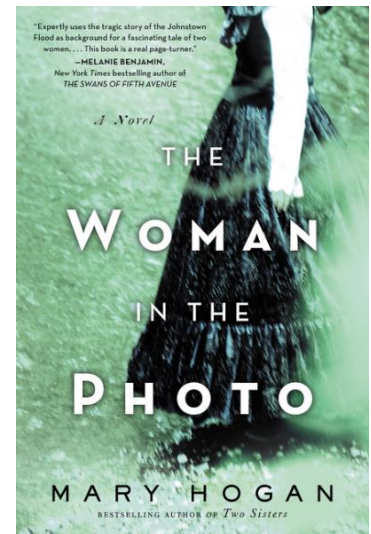
In this compulsively-readable historical novel, from the author of the critically-acclaimed *Two Sisters*, comes the story of two young women—one in America’s Gilded Age, one in scrappy modern-day California—whose lives are linked by a single tragic afternoon in history.

1888: Elizabeth Haberlin, of the Pittsburgh Haberlins, spends every summer with her family on a beautiful lake in an exclusive club. Nestled in the Allegheny Mountains above the working class community of Johnstown, Pennsylvania, the private retreat is patronized by society’s elite. Elizabeth summers with Carnegies, Mellons, and Fricks, following the rigid etiquette of her class. But Elizabeth is blessed (cursed) with a mind of her own. Case in point: her friendship with Eugene Eggar, a Johnstown steel mill worker. And when Elizabeth discovers that the club’s poorly maintained dam is about to burst and send 20 million tons of water careening down the mountain, she risks all to warn Eugene and the townspeople in the lake’s deadly shadow.

Present day: On her eighteenth birthday, genetic information from Lee Parker’s closed adoption is unlocked. She also sees an old photograph of a genetic relative—a 19th Century woman with hair and eyes like hers—standing in a pile of rubble from an ecological disaster next to none other than Clara Barton, the founder of the American Red Cross. Determined to identify the woman in the photo and unearth the mystery of that captured moment, Lee digs into history. Her journey takes her from California to Johnstown, Pennsylvania, from her present financial woes to her past of privilege, from the daily grind to an epic disaster. Once Lee’s heroic DNA is revealed, will she decide to forge a new fate?

Questions for Discussion

1. In what way, if any, do the events leading up to the Johnstown Flood resonate today?
2. One of the major themes of the book is the question “Is biology destiny?” Do you believe you are born to be the person you are meant to be? Or, can fate be shaped by human will?



3. If you were the product of a closed adoption (sealed records) would you try to identify your birth parents? If so, why?
4. Should the members of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club— essentially a timeshare—have been held legally accountable for the Johnstown disaster?
5. In 1889, a person’s clothes instantly identified his or her class. Do you think it’s the same today? Or are there other “class” identifiers that we use to judge people?
6. How many similarities between Elizabeth Haberlin and Lee Parker can you name?
7. Did Clara Barton become the historical figure she became because of her upbringing or *in spite* of it?
8. How did the confines of class affect the Haberlin family?
9. In a society where men held all the positions of power, in what ways did the *women* of this story make a difference?