

## Catherine House

Custom House

By Elisabeth Thomas

ISBN: 9780062905659

### Introduction

**“Dreamy and brimming with dread, *Catherine House* will swallow you whole.” — Rory Power, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Wilder Girls***

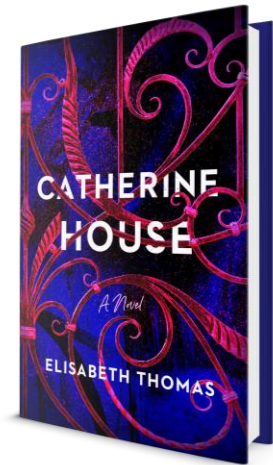
**A Most Anticipated Novel by *Cosmopolitan* • *Forbes* • *Good Housekeeping* • *Better Homes and Gardens* • *Newsweek* • *Harper’s Bazaar* • *Ms. Magazine* • *Woman’s Day* • *PopSugar* • and more!**

***Trust us, you belong here.***

Catherine House is a school of higher learning like no other. Hidden deep in the woods of rural Pennsylvania, this crucible of reformist liberal arts study with its experimental curriculum, wildly selective admissions policy, and formidable endowment, has produced some of the world’s best minds: prize-winning authors, artists, inventors, Supreme Court justices, presidents. For those lucky few selected, tuition, room, and board are free. But acceptance comes with a price. Students are required to give the House three years—summers included—completely removed from the outside world. Family, friends, television, music, even their clothing must be left behind. In return, the school promises a future of sublime power and prestige, and that its graduates can become anything or anyone they desire.

Among this year’s incoming class is Ines Murillo, who expects to trade blurry nights of parties, cruel friends, and dangerous men for rigorous intellectual discipline—only to discover an environment of sanctioned revelry. Even the school’s enigmatic director, Viktória, encourages the students to explore, to expand their minds, to find themselves within the formidable iron gates of Catherine. For Ines, it is the closest thing to a home she’s ever had. But the House’s strange protocols soon make this refuge, with its worn velvet and weathered leather, feel increasingly like a gilded prison. And when tragedy strikes, Ines begins to suspect that the school—in all its shabby splendor, hallowed history, advanced theories, and controlled decadence—might be hiding a dangerous agenda within the secretive, tightly knit group of students selected to study its most promising and mysterious curriculum.

Combining the haunting sophistication and dusky, atmospheric style of Sarah Waters with the unsettling isolation of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, *Catherine House* is a devious, deliciously steamy, and suspenseful page-turner with shocking twists and sharp edges that is sure to leave readers breathless.



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## Questions for Discussion

1. Would you have accepted an invitation from Catherine House? How much would you sacrifice for near-guaranteed success in life?
2. An orientation video says, "You will give to Catherine, and Catherine will give to you." Think about power dynamics at Catherine House. Who holds the power and who is being manipulated? Does Catherine deliver on its promise?
3. What do you make of Ines and Baby's friendship? What draws them to each other, and is their connection healthy? Do you think they viewed their relationship in the same way?
4. Catherine is grand and glamorous, but also faded and crumbling. How does this serve as a metaphor for the people and ideas within its walls? Is there beauty in decay?
5. Ines frequently labels her behaviors as good or bad. How does Catherine House challenge her self-perceptions? Do you think any of the characters in the novel are truly good or bad?
6. Catherine House asks its students to leave their past lives behind them. Can we ever erase our histories and traumas, or do they become part of us?
7. How much of herself does Ines give to Catherine? What lines does she cross and what does she keep separate? Why is it so difficult for Ines to imagine herself leaving, even after she discovers the cost of staying?
8. Think about M. Owen's statement: "Everyone likes bored, pretty girls . . . You are attractive because you can be anyone or anything . . . because you are nothing." Have you noted this phenomenon in fiction or reality? How does Ines fit or break this mold?
9. Despite its strict rules, Catherine House encourages disorder and experimentation. Why do you think Catherine allows certain activities? What were the students learning, or not learning?
10. What do you think Viktória and the other administrators at Catherine saw in Ines to take such keen interest? Do you think their actions throughout the three-year program were always leading to the same goal?
11. Why do you think Ines is drawn to art history? What do her observations about artwork reveal about her character?
12. What do you make of plasm? What do you think the new materials researchers were trying to achieve? How do you interpret the fates of their test subjects?
13. What was Catherine House really seeking in each of their students? What is true success in Catherine's eyes?
14. How do you interpret the ending of the novel? What do you think happened to Ines?