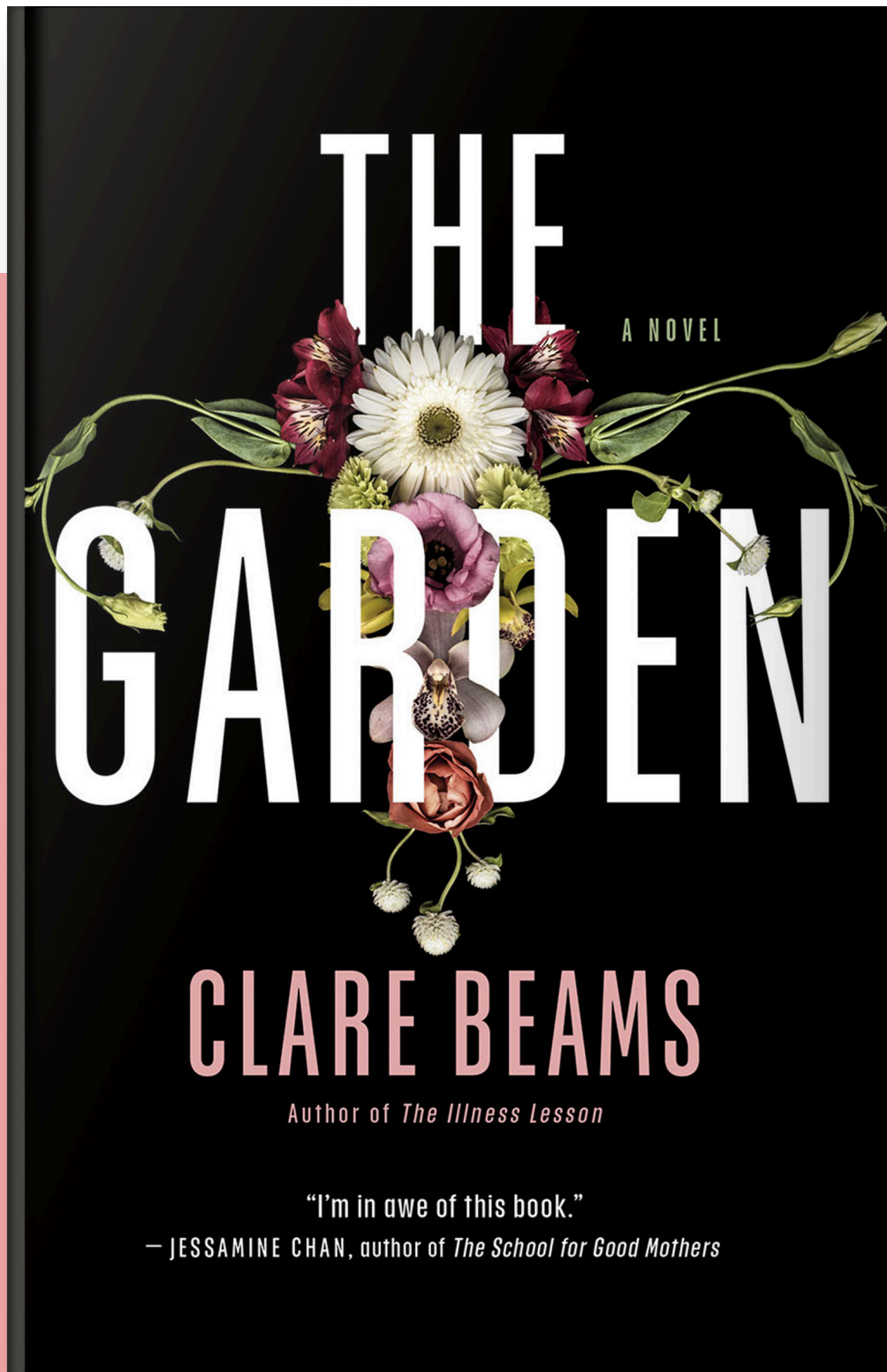




BOOK CLUB KIT





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Q&A WITH CLARE BEAMS

Was there a particular idea or story that inspired you to write *The Garden*? Why did you choose to focus on the experience of pregnancy?

The Garden had a few different seeds. First, a fascination with Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden* that has abided since I read it in childhood: the lure of that secret space, exploding with growth, that the main character turns into a realm of her own. Second, a reference I came across to a drug called diethylstilbestrol, a powerful synthetic estrogen pioneered by a husband-and-wife researcher team for use in preventing miscarriage and prescribed to women in this country from the 1940s through the 1970s, which has since been found to cause severe health problems. And third, my own experience with the surreal state of pregnancy. Each of these seeds planted itself in the novel and then transformed itself into something quite different from the original inspiration—as tends to happen in my fiction.

Irene is a very complex protagonist who enters the care of Dr. Bishop and Dr. Hall with a healthy dose of skepticism. How did her character come to be?

From her first appearance in my imagination, Irene was a habitual resister and rule-breaker. The anger behind these behaviors felt like an essential part of her character—maybe because it seemed to me almost the only natural response to the impossible situation she finds herself in, wanting nothing more than to give the man she loves wholeheartedly what he wants most, and finding this, repeatedly, impossible. Irene is viscerally reminded at every moment that the most important aspects of her life are completely outside her control, even as they play out within her own body. And then at the novel's start she's sequestered with these other women she doesn't know and these doctors she doesn't like, away from her husband. I imagined her responses to the book's developments by imagining what anyone's internal response might be, and then, often, externalizing that response in Irene's actions. Also, while this isn't something I can claim I was consciously aware of until quite late in the process, it turned out to be very important for the functioning of the novel that Irene tends naturally toward disobedience. So much of the book—and of any pregnancy—involves waiting: Irene and her resistance ended up creating crucial narrative movement within that inherent stillness.



Can you speak to the relationships between the women in the house? Irene, Margaret, and Pearl especially struggle to relate to one another, despite their going through such an emotional and physical ordeal together.

Irene's initial trouble connecting with Margaret and Pearl is just a more extreme version of her trouble connecting with most people: she isn't a person who forms relationships easily (George, her beloved husband, being her one great exception), and this house-hospital's continual forced togetherness brings an added strain. As the novel progresses, though, Irene finds her bond with these women forged almost in spite of herself: they understand each other, and they come to need each other, in ways that have everything to do with their mutual experience.

***The Garden* is a very haunting read. As a mother yourself, were there any scenes that you found particularly difficult to write?**

Oh, so much of the novel was difficult in this way. The very hardest sequence for me, probably, was [SPOILER ALERT!] the scene of Margaret's death and its aftermath: Irene's discovery of what has happened to her by that point deeply loved friend and of her own culpability, in various ways, for Margaret's fate.

What do you hope readers take away from *The Garden*?

I hope readers experience vicariously the characters' own visceral experiences in these pages—and become aware, or are reminded, of the deep strangeness of living inside a body, perhaps particularly a female body, and perhaps most particularly of all a pregnant body. I hope they think a little about societal efforts to control the bodies and selves of women—bodies and selves that pregnancy somehow both underscores and obscures—and the costs of those efforts. I don't believe these efforts and their costs are always merely historical.

Which books have most influenced you as a writer?

Too many to name with any hope at completeness! Especially important to this novel at various stages were Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* and *The Lottery and Other Stories*, Sarah Waters' *The Little Stranger*, Edith Wharton's ghost stories, and Kelly Link's long short story "Stone Animals."

If you could pose one discussion question to book clubs reading *The Garden*, what would it be?

What would you be willing to do, and what risks would you be willing to take, for what you want most in the world?



READING GROUP GUIDE

The questions, discussion topics, and other material that follow are intended to enhance your group's conversation of Clare Beams's transporting novel, *The Garden*—the story of a group of women undergoing a novel fertility treatment in a secluded Berkshires hospital shortly after World War II, when their desperation to become mothers collides with the realities, and fantasies, of what they're giving up to do so.

1. When Irene and George arrive at the center, is it clear that Irene wants to be there? What do we learn later in the novel about her motives for and investment in becoming a mother?

2. Throughout the book, Irene refers to her unborn child by different names: "the weight," a mouse, a moth, a snake, a possum. Besides the connection to the creatures she encounters at the hospital and garden, what do these names provide her with emotionally during the uncertain early months of her pregnancy? By imagining these creatures inside her, does she seem closer to, or more dissociated from, the baby? Consider what she says when the baby moves: "She'd had no idea love could swirl with horror this way" (140).

3. Why do you think Irene is unable to restrain her sarcastic and bold tone when working with the doctors and around the other women? How does this aspect of her personality both hurt her and help her at different moments during her stay at the hospital?

4. Psychoanalysis is just beginning to come into practice during the time of the novel. Is Dr. Bishop's approach familiar to you? How does Irene resist—and reverse—the dialogue between patient and therapist that this mode of therapy is designed around?

5. The seclusion of the women in the hospital reinforces the rigid gender roles of nuclear families in the late 1940s. How does what we know about Irene's relationship with George complicate those roles and expectations? When she reflects, "*I'm doing my best*, she thought at George, *I swear I am*, and wondered if it was true," in response to trying to have the baby to fulfill his needs after returning from war, who actually holds more power in the relationship (57)?

6. How does the doctors' plan to support the women through gardening set off the course of events for the novel? When the first seedlings fail to grow, how does this motivate Irene to take matters into her own hands in terms of protecting her baby?

7. Describe the alliance between Irene, Pearl, and Margaret. With all their different pregnancies and



births, who do you think sacrifices the most? Who gains the most?

8. Why do you think Irene is able to see and hear Dr. Bishop's grandfather and encounter the supernatural events in the garden? Do you think any other women before her had similar experiences and were able to make it through with healthy babies?

9. At what point does Irene shift her attitude toward Dr. Bishop from antagonistic to sympathetic? Consider what she thinks about Margaret's treatments: "Dr. Bishop would never hurt on purpose, Irene knew that—she had never doubted the doctor was trying to help, even if she was trying to help herself too. But she might act and act until helping and hurting were the same. How could Dr. Bishop ever know whether she'd done too much or not enough? She couldn't know, so she kept doing" (228).

10. What did the doctors stand to gain if their treatment methods were successful? Do you think they had any misgivings or guilt about losing so many women—and babies—as a result of their procedures and protocols? What is so convincing about their strategy that so many couples trust them?

11. After Irene catches Dr. Hall with Mrs. Conrad, the women reflect on how men are never taught to feel shame but are allowed to feel anger instead (222); Irene thinks that she "didn't know what shame looked like in George, unless, as the vision Dr. Hall had said, she'd seen it for years without knowing" (223). Do you think this division is true in the book and in society at large (then and now)? How does Irene in particular feel and express shame *and* anger during her time at the hospital? What about the other women?

12. Why do the three women hold onto the idea that their sacrifices in the garden are somehow connected to their pregnancies? Did you believe that there was

really some kind of force or magic at play—and do you think Irene really believed in it?

13. Were there moments in the book when you doubted Irene's sanity/mental clarity? Did you suspect that the confines of the hospital, or other conditions, were causing her perceptions and paranoias to change?

14. In each section of the book, Irene's baby takes on a new form—except the "Child" section (213), when a baby appears, but not hers. How does this shift reflect the way the women relate to one another by this point in the story? When Beatrice and Pearl leave with their babies, how do the others experience these events as a collective rather than just as individuals?

15. What would have happened if Irene hadn't gone into labor right after she called George to pick her up? Do you think he would have believed her and taken her home?

16. We get a glimpse into each of the women's experiences of birth throughout the novel, and Irene's is colored by the sedative drugs she's given: "Irene's mind, fixed by them, stopped drifting. The baby was drifting from her now. Because Irene had made this creature, but now she'd slipped out and away. She was separate. From now on, that was the way things would always be" (276).



Do you imagine that this experience shaped her relationship to her child once they got home and as their daughter grew up? What kind of mother do you think Irene became?

17. In the final scene of the book, we see Irene and Pearl, and their and Margaret's girls, ten years later. What does the narration in that scene reflect about how the women have changed? Do they express confidence about their daughters' ability to grow up in a world different from their own—or that their own sacrifices to have children were worth it?

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

The Soul of a Woman
Isabel Allende

The Handmaid's Tale
Margaret Atwood

The Mothers
Brit Bennett

The Secret Garden
Frances Hodgson Burnett

The School for Good Mothers
Jessamine Chan

Our Missing Hearts
Celeste Ng

The Farm
Joanne Ramos

Modern Lovers
Emma Straub

The Seed Keeper
Diane Wilson



PLAYLIST

In this playlist for *The Garden*, I've tried to balance the haunted, eerie feel that's crucial to the novel's atmosphere with the particular kind of rage that's a big part of its engine. Some of these are songs I've known and loved for a long time, and others are songs that *The Garden's* early readers said the novel brought to mind for them. A listen to the list should set the right mood for this reading experience.

“The Garden”

Mirah

“The Garden”

PJ Harvey

“Blue Lips”

Regina Spektor

“Seven Devils”

Florence and the Machine

“Won't Want for Love”

The Decemberists

“A Candle's Fire”

Beirut

“Familiar”

Agnes Obel

“Holocene”

Bon Iver

“Hot Knife”

Fiona Apple

“Heard them stirring”

Fleet Foxes

Scan the code below to listen to Clare's Spotify playlist:

