

BOOK CLUB KIT



INTRODUCTION

Inspired by headlines that gripped Minneapolis at the turn of the last century, acclaimed novelist Caroline Woods delivers a riveting murder mystery in *The Mesmerist*—and raises timeless questions about the illusions that stoke our deepest desires.

Abby Mendenhall is a board member and treasurer of the Bethany Home for Unwed Mothers, devoting her life to providing a safe haven for women who have nowhere else to turn. But a new guest shatters that sense of security, arriving late one night with bruises encircling her neck and a pouch of gold coins slipping from her ruined silk dress. Unable or unwilling to speak, she leaves a trail of unexplained disturbances in her wake. A lifelong Quaker, Abby names the mysterious girl Faith and tries to quash the rapidly spreading rumors about dark magic at Bethany Home.

Faith's roommate, May, dreams of a better life with her new beau, Hal, who doesn't know where she really lives. As May falls deeper and deeper under Hal's spell, she unwittingly becomes embroiled in a deadly scheme that targets the city's most vulnerable women, and that led Faith to go underground. The harder both women try to conceal the truth, the closer they get to becoming the next victims.

From opulent mansions to forbidden brothels frequented by a network of leading citizens, *The Mesmerist* races to a stunning conclusion. We hope this guide will enhance your reading group's experience of Caroline Woods's mesmerizing page-turner.



THE MESMERIST COCKTAIL RECIPE: THE JACK ROSE

The Mesmerist takes place at a home run by Quaker and Presbyterian ladies in 1894, all of whom were in favor of the Temperance movement. For that reason, there's just one cocktail that makes an appearance in the novel: a Jack Rose, which Faith sips, reluctantly at first, during her meeting with Hayward and Johnny at the West Hotel.

The Jack Rose was once one of America's favorite cocktails. It also has a rich literary history—Jake sips one in *The Sun Also Rises* as he waits for Lady Bret Ashley—but it's since gone out of favor. There's some disagreement as to when it was invented, and for whom it was named: maybe the turn-of-the-century gangster Baldy Jack Rose, maybe a bartender in New Jersey. Whichever is true, this is a Jersey drink through and through; it owes its tart apple flavor to Laird's applejack, also known as "Jersey Lightning."

Use real grenadine made from pomegranates for a richer, natural red hue and a much-improved flavor over the stuff of Shirley Temples.

JACK ROSE

INGREDIENTS

- ▶ 2 ounces Laird's applejack
- ▶ 1 ounce pomegranate grenadine, such as Liber & Co.
- ▶ half ounce lemon juice
- ▶ half ounce lime juice
- ▶ splash of Peychaud's bitters

DIRECTIONS

1. Add all ingredients into a cocktail shaker with ice. Shake well.
2. Strain into a chilled coupe glass.
3. Garnish with a slice of green apple and a raspberry on a cocktail skewer, or a lemon twist.

Mocktail version: The Virgin Queen

In honor of Abby Mendenhall and Temperance, and for anyone looking to lower her alcohol consumption, here's a mocktail version of the Jack Rose that's just as delicious and even a bit healthy! Ruby red and apple-scented, this is the perfect mocktail to usher in fall.

THE VIRGIN QUEEN

INGREDIENTS

- ▶ 2 ounces pink lady apple kombucha
- ▶ 1 ounce pomegranate grenadine, such as Liber & Co.
- ▶ half ounce lemon juice
- ▶ half ounce lime juice

DIRECTIONS

1. Add all ingredients into a cocktail shaker with ice. Shake well.
2. Strain into a chilled coupe glass.
3. Garnish with a slice of green apple and a raspberry on a cocktail skewer, or a lemon twist.

QUESTIONS & TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1 From the moment of Faith's arrival at Bethany Home, what were your impressions of her? How did your feelings about her evolve as the story of her life gradually came into focus?

2 As the mystery of Priscilla Black unfolded, what were your theories about her disappearance? What do the differences among the novel's three madams—Swede Kate, Agnes Bly, and Priscilla Black—indicate about the differences in their clientele?

3 At the end of chapter 12, we learn about the early days of Abby's marriage to Junius: "Though she'd kept a brave face for her new husband, she'd initially been horrified by this place," leading her to seek out meaningful work. In creating Bethany Home with Charlotte, how did Abby also fulfill her own need for a sense of home? If Abby had lived in the twenty-first century, how might she have served young women?

4 What common threads run through the early life stories of May, Pearl, Dolly, and Leigh?

What made them vulnerable, and what made them strong? What does the stark contrast between Abby's protected childhood and Faith's horrific one demonstrate about fate and the families we ultimately get to create for ourselves?

5 If you could have a palm reading from Faith, what questions would you want her to answer? What predictions would you hope she would make?

6 On page 221, Faith scoffs at Hayward's assertion that she succumbed to his manipulations "when Johnny and I took you upstairs." Despite the fact that she was being abused and exploited, she didn't want to think of it "as something they'd persuaded her to do against her will. It had been her choice." Why is it important for her to tell herself this? What does it take for Faith to be free, and for her life's path to truly be her choice?

7 Is May naive, or is she simply following the few pathways society has given her? What is Hayward's greatest leverage over her?

8 What does the novel tell us about the ingredients for being mesmerizing, and the reasons someone might fall under the spell of a mesmerist? Who are the mesmerists in our world?

9 When Tuva “escapes,” she tells Abby that the job skills provided at Bethany Home pay meager wages, and we know that Tuva abhorred farmwork. What options would you select if you were in Tuva’s situation?

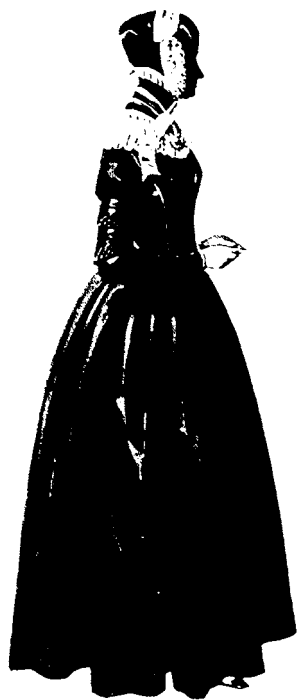
10 Abby dearly loves Euphemia and sometimes wistfully imagines a life without men. From politics to policing, without a constitutional right to vote, how does she overcome the social restrictions she was born into? Is her religious faith a form of liberation for her?

11 Is money the only motivation that fuels Johnny Lundberg and Harry Hayward, or are there additional motivators for their evil acts?

12 Discuss Miss Rhoades’s revelations. How does her ghost story give voice to the realities of motherhood, as well as mourning?

13 How does Caroline Woods’s storytelling—in *The Mesmerist* and in her other novels that you have read—bring historical truth to life in a memorable way? What is special about her approach to the lived experiences of women? How did you react to the author’s note and the real-life inspiration for the cast of characters?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING



Debby Applegate, *Madam* (nonfiction)

Kate Atkinson, *Shrines of Gaiety*

Jo Baker, *The Midnight News*

Kevin Barry, *The Heart in Winter*

Flynn Berry, *Trust Her*

Clare Beams, *The Garden*

Chris Bohjalian, *The Guest Room*

Tess Gunty, *The Rabbit Hutch*

Marjan Kamali, *The Lion Women of Tehran*

Valerie Martin, *Mrs. Gulliver*

Jayne Anne Phillips, *Night Watch*

Kate Quinn, *The Briar Club*

Maggie Shipstead, *Great Circle*

J. Courtney Sullivan, *The Cliffs*

PLAYLIST

Listen on Spotify [here](#)

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/7uRnX3v4O0xIOIYXoRvmoV?si=7076029a2ee74ca2>

“Searching for the Ghost”

by Heartless Bastards

“Minnesota, WI”

by Bon Iver

“Magic Man”

by Heart

“Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun”

by Claude Debussy

“Bloodless”

by Andrew Bird

“Who by Fire”

by Leonard Cohen

“Gnossienne No. 1”

by Erik Satie

“The Kill”

by Maggie Rogers

“Play With Fire”

by The Rolling Stones

“The Way It Goes”

by Gillian Welch