

Reading Group Questions

SUMMARY

Only the Innocent is a complex tale of love, loyalty, abuse, repression and death. The story begins with a murder, but it is no ordinary murder. It's a carefully planned execution and there is little doubt in the minds of the police that the crime was committed by a woman.

Yet women are rarely cold-blooded killers, and the victim - Sir Hugo Fletcher - is a man revered the world over for his philanthropy, particularly in relation to his charity to help Eastern European prostitutes who have been brought into the country against their will.

As the story develops, we discover that Sir Hugo was not the paragon of virtue that he appears to be, and gradually the darker side of his character is revealed through a mixture of conversation between characters and interviews with Chief Inspector Tom Douglas, but his worst characteristics are exposed through letters that his wife Laura has written (but never sent) to her best friend, Imogen.

Imogen hated Hugo with a passion, primarily because he cruelly and intentionally caused the breakdown of her marriage to Laura's brother, but also because she knows how he has treated Laura, causing the gradual destruction of her vivacious character through his subtle abuse.

However, it is only as the story develops that Abbott reveals the very darkest aspects of Hugo's character, and the worst of his deeds, resulting in a climax that poses the question which only Tom Douglas can answer : should we punish the guilty or protect the innocent.

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. One of this novel's key characteristics is the way it portrays a number of complex relationships, and explores the motivations of individuals within the story.
 - What do you believe motivated Laura to stay with Hugo in the early years of their marriage?
 - Do you think that Tom's decision to reject Kate's offer of a reconciliation was an objective or emotional choice?
 - Was Will right to abandon his marriage to Imogen because of one apparent infidelity, in spite of her denials?
 - Why did Hugo believe that Imogen's relationship with Laura was dangerous?

2. Before they were married, Hugo amazed Laura with his apparent kindness and consideration - choosing what she should eat, overseeing (and paying for) her wardrobe, and planning their wedding. At what point does kindness and consideration become control? How is it possible to differentiate between the two? How can you resist control without giving offense if it is a genuine act of consideration?
3. During the first night of their honeymoon in Venice, Hugo makes various requests of Laura which she finds uncomfortable. Was there an alternative to her reaction that might have changed the landscape of their marriage without risk of divorce?
4. Hugo's gradual but persistent undermining of Laura takes place over their first few years together without any outward displays of anger or violence. What are the characteristics of this type of abuse, and why do some women allow it to happen? What advice would you have given to Laura as a friend if you were aware that it was happening?
5. The Allium Foundation is a charity to support Eastern European prostitutes who are brought in to the UK under false pretences or against their will. Discuss actions that could be taken to reduce the influx of these girls into the country, and options for helping them to escape from their lives.
6. When Laura suspects that Hugo's relationship with some of the prostitutes goes beyond the remit of the charity, she takes various actions : she visits his office, employs a private detective and ultimately contacts a senior policeman. Could she have taken any other action, either then or in the two years between her initial suspicions and the final revelations about Hugo?
7. Throughout the enquiry, Tom adopts a softly, softly approach - much to Becky's disappointment. Do you think he could have adopted a different approach, given the total lack of evidence, and if so what do you believe would have been the impact on the outcome?
8. Most of the revelations about Laura's life with Hugo are exposed through the letters that Laura wrote, but never sent, to Imogen. What did you feel were the advantages of Abbott using these as a device, and what were the disadvantages? Could the story have been told in a different way to give the same level of detail of thoughts, feelings and events?
9. Tom is faced with a terrible dilemma when all is revealed. He is committed to justice - but justice for whom? Should the guilty be punished, or the innocent protected? Discuss Tom's decision. Was he right or wrong? What impact do you believe that this decision will have on his life going forwards?
10. What would it take for YOU to commit a murder? Was the perpetrator of the crime right or wrong? Was there an alternative, given all the evidence presented in the book?