

Book Club Questions – The Art of Inheriting Secrets

Upon her mother's death, Olivia Shaw inherits Rosemere Priory, an old English manor she immediately recognizes from the paintings and children's books done by her artist mother. In inheriting the house, she also inherits the job of uncovering her family's hidden past, a sad and frustrating task for Olivia considering that many people in the village know more about her family than she does. Do you think Olivia's mother did her a service by concealing this painful piece of her past, or do you think it cheated Olivia out of knowing who she is and where she came from?

The restoration of Rosemere Priory also begins the restoration of Olivia's confidence. Do you think she would have been able to achieve that restoration of confidence if she had returned to her old life? Or do you think she needed to embrace these uncertain and difficult changes to strengthen herself and start again?

Olivia leaves the States with heartbreak and hardship on her mind. Certainly, the loss of her mother and her dog, her car accident, and the heavy secret of this English identity has thrown her emotions into chaos. In addition, the distance she achieves in going to England gives her the distance she needs to see the relationship with her fiancé in a new and necessary light. Enter Samir. Do you think the circumstances in her life make Olivia vulnerable to Samir and a relationship with him, or do you think he is the right relationship for her at the right time?

Olivia arrives in England with a broken body and a broken heart. Which one do you think will be the hardest of the two for her to mend and why?

The Malakar family gives Olivia a glimpse into a family life she has never known. What do you think most draws her to this family and why?

Olivia is the food editor of the culinary magazine, *Egg and Hen*, and is someone who takes comfort in food, using her culinary experiences to ground herself in the here and now. We see this early in the book, when she first arrives at her hotel and savors the malt vinegar and the flaky fish of her fish and chips and again at her neighbor Rebecca's house, where Olivia is delighted by the surprising notes in the venison stew—a hint of sweetness from red currant jam. Then, of course, there is the delight of the Indian food at Coriander. What are some of your favorite memories and traditions around food?

The surprise inheritance of an old English manor house, and the countess title that goes with it, sounds like a fairy tale come true. In Olivia's case, she also inherits the secrets and problems that haunt each part of her new estate—all leading to circumstances that change her life and her future in ways she could have never foreseen. The book is part mystery, part love story, part family saga. What part of the book did you like the most? Which part did you like the least?

In venturing to England, Olivia has left one world behind and entered something very new and different. There were obvious differences—the countryside, the house, the customs, but there was one that snuck up and surprised her. Back in the arty, techy Bay Area everyone used all social media all the time. In a chat with neighbor Rebecca, she says, “Who has time for that?” when Olivia casually mentions posting Rebecca’s pets to YouTube. How often are you on social media? How much has social media changed the way you interact with the world?

Barbara O’Neal weaves a cast of secondary characters into solving the mystery of Olivia’s family and Rosemere Priory. If there was one character about whom you would like to see a follow up book written, which character would it be and why? (There are no follow ups planned, but it is still something fun to consider!)

In addition to telling a story, an author’s task is to build a believable world that brings the story alive in a way that transcends words. Barbara O’Neal does this through creating the lush English setting against the picture of decay of Rosemere Priory, but she also does it through the sight, taste, and smell of food, with the light through the aged stain glassed windows, or the full blooms of the flowers in the gardens. Have you read other books that have transported you to the worlds their authors have created? What have you liked about their places and descriptions?

Olivia’s mother loved treasure hunts, and Barbara O’Neal uses this story choice to send Olivia on a last treasure hunt to uncover the biggest secret of the book. Did you like the use of this plot device, or could you foresee a different way that Barbara could have unveiled the darkest unknown of the book?