

# The Distant Hours

By Kate Morton

## Reading Group Guide

*This reading group guide for **The Distant Hours** includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

### INTRODUCTION

A long-lost letter arrives in the post and Edie Burchill finds herself on a journey to Milderhurst Castle, a grand but moldering old place in the English countryside. Once home to Edie's mother fifty years before during World War II, the only current residents are the elderly Blythe sisters—Persephone (Percy), Seraphina (Saffy), and Juniper. Inside the decaying castle, Edie begins to unravel her mother's story—uncovering secrets hidden in the stones and discovering the long-awaited truth of what really happened in “the distant hours” of the past.

### TOPICS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The novel opens with the prologue from Raymond Blythe's fictional, famous work, *The True History of the Mud Man*. He writes: “The moat has begun to breathe. Deep, deep, mired in the mud, the buried man's heart kicks wetly...the Mud Man opens an eye. Sharp, sudden, tracks it back and forth.” (p. 3) Did you think that the Mud Man was a human being, a monster, or something else? Why did the author choose to open the novel with such a dark, frightening story? How did reading this prologue affect the way you entered the story?
2. From the beginning, it is clear that words, books, and stories have a strong hold on Edie Burchill. Referring to the letter her mother receives from Juniper Blythe, Edie reflects, “a letter will always seek a reader...sooner or later, like it or not, words have a way of finding the light, of making their secrets known.” (p. 9) Why does Juniper's letter have such a strong impact on Meredith? How does Edie's experience as an editor and obsession with words impact her determination to unravel the mystery of Milderhurst Castle, the Blythe sisters, and her mother's role in their lives? Besides Juniper's letter, what other words—in the form of letters, diaries, stories, books—make their secrets known in the novel?
3. Again and again, Milderhurst Castle is portrayed as a living, breathing entity, constructed of stones that “sing” and riddled with passageways that form a network of “veins.” When Edie first meets the

sisters, Percy refers to herself as a buttress for the castle's architecture —“I've done what was necessary to stop the walls collapsing around us” (p. 67)—while Saffy cannot spend more than one night away from the castle, “due to strong feelings about sleeping in her own bed and being on hand to prop up the castle, bodily if need be, should it begin to crumble.” (p. 125) Why is Milderhurst Castle depicted in such human terms, and why are the sisters described as a physical part of the castle itself? To what extent does the castle depend on the sisters for its existence? To what extent do the sisters rely on the castle for their survival?

4. Edie has two encounters with Juniper in the first section of the novel. The first time, Juniper is a confused and disheveled old woman. Just pages later she is fresh faced, girlish, and dressed in the wedding gown that Saffy made for her so many years before. Discuss what Edie learns about Juniper in each instance and why the author depicts Juniper in contrasting ways in such quick succession. Does Edie have more sympathy for one version of Juniper than the other? Which version of Juniper is closer to who she really is?

5. With the exception of Juniper, the Blythe sisters do not know that Edie Burchill is Meredith Baker's daughter. Why doesn't Edie ever reveal who she is to the sisters? Do you think that Percy and Saffy had any knowledge of her true identity?

6. Saffy constantly expresses her displeasure over the war and how it has affected her life. She thinks to herself, “It was a tragedy that so many of the nation's flower gardens had been abandoned or given over to vegetable cultivation...Lack of potatoes left a person's stomach growling, but absence of beauty hardened the soul.” (p. 122) How does Saffy attempt to keep the castle beautiful despite the difficulties posed by the war, and why is beauty so important to her? What examples do you see of characters whose souls hardened because of a lack of beauty during the war? How does Saffy's view of war and wartime life contrast with Percy's?

7. As Saffy and Percy wait for Thomas Cavill to arrive at Milderhurst Castle on that fateful evening that he and Juniper are to announce their engagement, Saffy remarks, “You mustn't prejudge him for being late, Percy...it's the fault of the war. Nothing runs on time anymore.” (p. 198) What does Saffy mean by this comment? To what extent does war still affect the sisters' lives and life at Milderhurst Castle in the present day sections of the novel?

8. Just as Aunt Rita never understood why Meredith did not want to leave Milderhurst and return home when the evacuation was over, Percy cannot understand why Saffy wants to leave the castle and take a job in

London. Why are Meredith and Saffy both drawn to a life that is opposite to their own? What does Meredith gain by living in the country, and why does she run away from her parents when faced with the prospect of moving back to London? Why does Percy allow Juniper to go to London and not Saffy?

9. As Edie and her mother sit in the emergency room after her father's heart attack, Edie says, "I was sunk by the sense that I knew everything and nothing of the person sitting next to me. The woman in whose body I had grown strong and whose house I'd been raised in was in some ways a vital stranger to me." (p. 243) Why is it so jarring for Edie to learn the secrets of her mother's past? Do you see any parallels between Edie's discoveries about her mother's past and the discoveries that the Blythe sisters make about one another? How do the characters attempt to understand revelations about family members whom they thought they knew?

10. When Percy explains her reasons for not handing Milderhurst over to the National Trust, she says, "A place is more than the sum of its physical parts; it's a repository for memories, a record and retainer of all that has happened within its boundaries" (p. 319). In light of everything that happens in the novel, how do you interpret this statement? What does Milderhurst mean to the sisters and why do they feel so connected to it? Why do the Blythe sisters say that the castle's stones sing of the "distant hours" and what does this mean?

11. Recalling the first time she encountered *The True History of the Mud Man*, Edie reflects "that in my hands I held an object whose simple appearance belied its profound power....real life was never going to be able to compete with fiction again." (p. 31) By contrast, Thomas, who teaches literature before he enlists in the army, believes that words on the page cannot compare to real life: "When he read to his students about the battle cry of Henry V, he scraped against the shallow floor of his limited experience. War, he knew, would give him the depth of understanding he craved." (p. 354) Which character's perspective do you identify with more, and why? How does each character's viewpoint on reality versus fiction prove to be true or false based on their experiences throughout the novel?

12. Throughout the course of the novel, the author offers various perspectives and opinions about Juniper's mental state and what sets her apart from her sisters. When Juniper hallucinates, some doctors prescribe pills, while "Daddy said they were the voices of her ancestors and that she had been chosen specially to hear them." (p. 368) Why do you think the author is deliberately vague about what affects Juniper? Why is Juniper so afraid of becoming like her father? What does it mean for her to "lose time" when the past and present are so intertwined throughout the novel? Are Percy and Saffy justified in their efforts to keep Juniper as sheltered as they

do?

13. Just as the characters of the novel often feel as if incidents from the past are occurring in the present day, the structure of the novel moves in time between past and present, allowing insight into characters at various stages in their lives and a unique window into the events that shaped them. Did you find this technique of switching between time periods effective? Which sections did you prefer, the past or present? Why do the events of the past play such a vital role in what happens in the present day sections of the novel?

14. Toward the end of the novel, Edie learns the origins of the story of the Mud Man and Saffy's nightmares. Edie thinks, "It was little wonder he'd been driven mad by guilt." (p. 583) If this is true, why does Raymond take up Saffy's dream and turn it into a story for children to read? Does writing *The True History of the Mud Man* do anything to assuage his guilt? How does the publication of the book and the story affect the Blythe sisters? What is it about the story of the Mud Man that captivates readers to the point of obsession? Who can most lay claim to the story of the Mud Man?

15. Discuss the conclusion of the novel. Do you think Edie was honest about her reasons for not wanting to write the prologue to the new edition of *The True History of the Mud Man*? Do you think Edie's involvement with the sisters in any way led to what happens to them at the end of the novel? Were you surprised by the fate of the sisters? Why or why not?

#### **ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB**

1. Saffy fondly recalls a game her family played where "a location, a character type, and a word would be supplied, then Cook's largest egg-timer flipped, and the race would be on to craft the most entertaining fiction" (135). Using the guidelines provided by Saffy, devise your own version of this writing game and play it with your book group.

2. Edie, an only child, marvels at the complicated bonds between the Blythe sisters: "the intricate tangle of love and duty and resentment...the glances they exchanged; the complicated balance of power established over decades; the games I would never play with rules I would never understand." (p. 523) Discuss the bonds between you and your siblings and whether or not you think the author captures that unique relationship. If you are an only child, talk about whether or not you wanted siblings as you were growing up.

3. While Edie is a full time reader by trade, *The True History of the Mud Man* was the book that sparked her life-long interest in words and stories. Discuss some of the books that ignited your passion for reading as a child. If you have children, do you plan to share those books with them, or have you done so already?

4. When Percy shows Edie around her father's study, she notices a painting that Percy says scared them as children on the wall, "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters" by Goya. Look up this piece of artwork at [www.museum.cornell.edu](http://www.museum.cornell.edu) and discuss how the image relates to and illuminates the themes of madness and art in the novel.