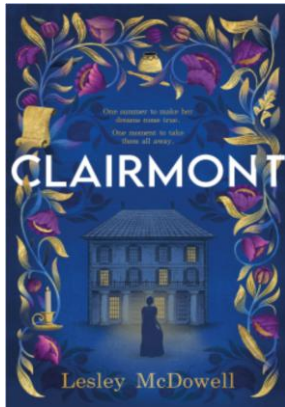


Book club questions for CLAIRMONT by Lesley McDowell



1. Claire once wrote that 'I would willingly think that my memory may not be lost in oblivion as my life has been.' She watched biographies and memoirs appear throughout her life, written about people she knew intimately. Why do you think she feared being forgotten about? Was it just because she was a woman? Was it because she had lived alongside people more famous than her? Or do you think the fact that she had to hide who she was when she was living in Russia meant she suppressed her own story too much? Was she the architect of her own silencing?
2. Claire was Mary Shelley's step-sister, after her mother married Mary's father when Claire was only two years old. What do you think about the relationship between the two women as portrayed in the novel? How does it change over time? What kind of power dynamic exists between the two women, when one of them becomes famous, and the other has to hide who she is?
3. Biographers still disagree over how intimate Claire's relationship was with the poet, Shelley. What do you think is the truth of that relationship, as the novel shows it? Do you think Claire was right to trust Shelley's advice about her daughter Allegra?
4. Claire came to rue the day she became involved with Byron, and to handing their child over to his care. Do you think she could have kept Allegra after all? Some biographers think Claire should have taken a more submissive and polite attitude towards Byron after she placed Allegra with him – do you agree? Would that have yielded better results?
5. Claire grew up in a 'radical' household, with the philosopher William Godwin as her step-father. Poets like Coleridge visited the family. Do you think she and Mary were an anomaly of the time, when they absconded to Europe with Shelley when they were only teenagers? Or were they just like Lydia Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*? Do you think a lot of young women made rash decisions with their reputations, more than we probably know?
6. Claire belongs to the era known as the 'Romantic' era, which valued Nature and Individualism. Shelley called poets 'the unacknowledged legislators of the earth'. Does that era, which came before the Victorian era, seem more modern to you? Mary Shelley's mother was Mary Wollstonecraft, the feminist pioneer, who wanted women to have an education and careers. How much did Claire take on this modern notion?
7. At the end of the book, Claire seems to forgive Mary. Both women lost children. Do you think she really did forgive Mary in real life, given what they had both been through?

Further reading:

Mary Shelley *Frankenstein*

Mary Wollstonecraft *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*

Robert Gittings and Jo Manton *Claire Clairmont and the Shelleys*

Richard Holmes *Shelley: The Pursuit*