

*This reading group guide for Brontë's Mistress provides an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Finola Austin. 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**

Yorkshire, 1843: Lydia Robinson, mistress of Thorp Green Hall, has lost her precious young daughter and her mother within the same year. With her teenage daughters rebelling, her hateful mother-in-law breathing down her neck, and her marriage grown cold, Lydia is restless and yearning for something more.

Change comes with the arrival of her son's tutor, Branwell Brontë, brother of her daughters' governess, Anne Brontë, and those other writerly sisters, Charlotte and Emily. Handsome and romantic, a painter and a poet, Branwell is twenty-five to Lydia's forty-three. Colorful tales of his sisters' elaborate playacting and made-up worlds form the backdrop for seduction, and soon Branwell's intensity and Lydia's loneliness find a dangerous match in each other.

Grave consequences for Lydia's transgression loom. Her prying servants blackmail her for their silence, her husband becomes suspicious, and Branwell's behavior grows increasingly erratic while whispers of the affair reach his bookish sisters.

With this swirling vortex of passion and peril threatening to consume everything she has built, the canny Mrs. Robinson must find the means to save her way of life, and quickly, before clever Charlotte, Emily, and Anne reveal all of her secrets in their deceptively domestic novels.

That is, unless she dares to write her own story first.

Deliciously rendered and captivatingly told, *Brontë's Mistress* reimagines the scandalous affair that has divided Brontë enthusiasts for generations and gives voice to the woman vilified by history as the "wicked elder seductress" who allegedly brought down the entire Brontë family.

## **Topics & Questions for Discussion**

1. On page 51, Lydia Robinson remarks, "How funny it is that men and women struggle as they die, but few of us kick or scream as we are lowered alive into our tombs." How would you describe Lydia's state of mind at the start of *Brontë's Mistress*?
2. What is Lydia's relationship with her daughters like? Why do you think that she is often critical of them? On page 80, she pens, "Motherhood was about offering truth, not comfort. For all it still tugged at my heartstrings to hear her cry so, Lydia needed to leave behind her childish notions. And I must be the one to disabuse her." Why does the elder Lydia feel that it's her duty to do so? Do you agree with her (taking into account the historical context)?
3. Lydia feels strongly about her daughters' marriage prospects and remarks on page 90, "I

would take action and defend them from a woman's worst fate—to be extraneous and unneeded.” Given that this is Lydia's greatest fear, how does this worry drive her actions and affect her decisions throughout the novel? Does she ever become “extraneous”? Do the Brontës?

4. Women throughout history are often cast as the temptress when they engage in sexual relationships outside of wedlock. What famous examples of this can you think of? How is this portrayed in *Brontë's Mistress*? Is more of the burden for the affair put on Lydia than it is on Branwell? Do you believe that Edmund's emotional distance from Lydia played a role in her affair, and if so, does any of the burden fall on him?

5. A great deal of Lydia's focus revolves around what is economically safe and savvy for herself and her family. Why do you think she engages in this affair with Branwell, given all the risks to her financial well-being and societal status?

6. On page 136, Lydia says to Anne Brontë, “You never had your chance. . . . And, now, look at the life you are forced to lead—you and your sisters. You must choose between being a drudge or a burden.” Do you think Lydia is being harsh or truthful here? Are we meant to sympathize with her? Did writing novels offer a third alternative path to the Brontë sisters? Do female main characters have to act a certain way for readers to sympathize with them?

7. Why do you think Lydia is so fascinated with Charlotte?

8. How would you characterize Lydia's relationship with Marshall? Compare Marshall to Lydia's own mother (as we're told) or to Lydia and her daughters' relationship. Do you think there is anything romantic and/or sexual in their connection?

9. Before Lydia travels to Allestree Hall, she says on page 245, “Sir Edward might be saving me, but I would not abdicate my power. I could not allow myself to make the same mistakes again.” In what way did Lydia abdicate her power in past relationships? How does she work to change that dynamic when she's with Sir Edward? Do you think she's successful in keeping her power?

10. Women have more options today than in Victorian times. But do you think there is still undue pressure on women in romantic, sexual, or economic relationships? Do some aspects of Lydia's experience apply to women today?

11. Consider Lydia's relationship with Dr. Crosby. Why do you think he shares with her the fact that he's attracted to men? How does their relationship grow over the course of the novel, and how is it unique from any of the other relationships in Lydia's life?

12. Lydia's affair with Branwell has been historically characterized as bringing down the entire Brontë family. Having read this novel, do you believe that to be true? Why do you think this blame has been laid at Lydia's feet?

13. Did Lydia's encounter with Charlotte go the way you expected it would? Lydia writes, “The tears I was choking on now seemed less for Branwell than for his sisters, for the fact that they would always hate me” (page 287). Why do you think Charlotte's rejection of Lydia affected her so much? Do you think she feels closer to the Brontë sisters than to Branwell by

this point? Why?

14. What do you think of the ending and Lydia's "almost overwhelming desire to write a novel of my own. A story about me?" (page 297)? In what ways was her own story told for her in the past? How did her tangential relationship with the Brontë sisters inspire this? What stories of real women from the past may be lost to us?

### **Enhance Your Book Club**

1. Read some of the Brontë sisters' famous works, such as *Jane Eyre*, *Agnes Grey*, and *Wuthering Heights*. Did you notice any references to parts of these novels in *Brontë's Mistress*? What were they? Was your opinion of the characters in Brontë's *Mistress* affected by your reading of these famous works? Conversely, if you've already read works by the Brontës, was your perspective on their family changed by reading *Brontë's Mistress*?
2. Read and reflect on other works where female figures from history or literature are cast as the main character—for example, *The Paris Wife*, *Mrs. Poe*, *Loving Frank*, and *Z*. Consider how the retelling of their stories gives voice to women whose history and perspectives are often glossed over in a telling of history and a literary canon written almost entirely by men.
3. You can find the fully designed book club kit at [finolaaustin.com/book-clubs](http://finolaaustin.com/book-clubs). In it, you can read Finola Austin's travelogue of her visit to the grounds of Thorp Green Hall and see a map of the buildings mentioned in the novel.

### **A Conversation with Finola Austin**

Q: How did you first become interested in the Brontës? What made you decide to tell Lydia Robinson's story?

A: I've always loved nineteenth-century literature. Charlotte Brontë and Charles Dickens were probably the first two Victorian novelists I read as a child, and in my teens, I raced through the works of all three Brontë sisters. After doing an undergraduate degree in Classics and English, I stayed on at the University of Oxford to complete a master's in Victorian literature. While my dissertation focused on sensation novelists Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins, I also wrote a paper on Charlotte Brontë (particularly on romantic relationships between students and teachers in her novels).

It wasn't until 2016, though, when I was reading the first biography of Charlotte Brontë (by fellow nineteenth-century novelist Elizabeth Gaskell), that I came across Lydia Robinson's story. I was immediately fascinated—by Gaskell's assassination of Lydia's character and by what a contrast this Mrs. Robinson would be to many of Charlotte's protagonists. Brontë heroines are often poor, plain, young, and virginal. But here was a woman who was wealthy, beautiful, in her forties, and sexually experienced. I realized hers was a very different story, and one that I wanted to tell.

Q: You've done a great deal of research in order to write this novel. Where has your research taken you, and what was the most surprising thing you discovered?

A: I spent a full year researching *Brontë's Mistress* before I began writing, and I went on a

research trip to Yorkshire (“Bronte” country”) after completing my first draft. I detail a lot of my research in the Author’s Note at the end the novel, but some of the highlights for me were taking tea in Dr. Crosby’s front parlor, holding Lydia’s letters and Edmund’s accounts book, seeing the wonderful statuette of a monk above the front door of Monk’s Lodge, and, of course, visiting the Bronte” Parsonage Museum.

A particular focus of the research for me was doing justice to the Thorp Green servants. I wanted to understand their roles in the house, but also who they were as people. These details really helped me to picture them as individuals with stories of their own and families at home, even when I wasn’t able to include all of them.

Q: It seems that you were drawn to a woman who was wronged by history’s telling of her life. Are there any other such women in history or literature who spark your interest?

A: Lots! While Lydia was cast as the villain of the Bronte”s’ story, many women have been wronged by history because their stories haven’t been told at all. Women have often been confined to the domestic sphere rather than acting center stage in politics or standing on the front line of battlefields, but for me, this doesn’t make their histories less important.

Q: On page 83, Branwell says to Lydia, “Charlotte talks from time to time of the novel as the ‘literary pinnacle of our age,’” and Lydia thinks to herself, “I’d always assumed my taste for them was confirmation of my feminine frivolity.” How were novels regarded in the mid-nineteenth century? Did the Bronte”s’ works cause novels to be held in higher esteem at the time, or did their fame come later?

A: In the nineteenth century, women were major consumers of novels, just as they are today. They read them in three volumes, borrowed from circulating libraries, or serialized chapter by chapter in their favorite publications. Perhaps because of this association with femininity, novels were often regarded as inferior to highbrow literature such as poetry.

Victorian novelist George Eliot (another woman writing under a male pseudonym, like the Bronte” sisters) wrote an essay, “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists,” in 1856, criticizing the formulaic genre fiction so many women wrote about and enjoyed. Her title clearly linked femininity to frivolity.

While the Bronte”s’ works (especially Charlotte’s) have always been regarded as a step above the writing of many of their contemporaries, I think even today we see a repetition of this pattern. When I’ve told people I’m writing about the Bronte”s, many respond to me by dismissing *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* as “just romances” and “for women.” While for me, *Bronte”s Mistress* doesn’t seem romantic, I don’t see writing romance as lesser than other genres or writing for women as a weakness.

Q: Why did you decide to make the dynamic between Lydia and her daughters a more distant one? Was that common for relationships between women in families at the time? What historical texts and examples did you refer to when shaping this relationship?

A: Attitudes toward parenting have shifted dramatically since the nineteenth century (in fact, the word *parenting* started to emerge only in the late twentieth century as theorists started to

understand the formative nature of our early experiences). The Victorians engaged in many practices we typically turn away from today, including employing wet nurses to feed their infants and regularly using corporal punishment to discipline children. Lydia then might not have seemed like a “bad mother” to her contemporaries as much as today we might question her choices in the novel. With sons much more valuable to families at that time, due to women’s limited options, it also made sense to me that Lydia might have a strained relationship with her daughters, believing that “tough love” was the right way to prepare them for the realities of their position as women.

I had two main literary models in mind here. First, Mrs. Bennet from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*. Mrs. Bennet and Lydia are very different in terms of temperament, but their outlook is similar: their daughters should seek to marry well, but be practical and unromantic about their prospects. The second model was a character named Mrs. Winstanley from a lesser-read Victorian novel—*Vixen*, by Mary Elizabeth Braddon. Mrs. Winstanley is a mother obsessed with her daughter Violet’s size (similar to how Lydia worries about Bessy’s figure in *Bronte’s Mistress*). Braddon eventually reveals that Violet is five feet six inches with a 22-inch waist (she could probably fit into a US size 0 today). Braddon is clearly playing this for laughs. She’s pointing out the maternal character’s ridiculousness, but she strikes at a truth: when women are valued solely or largely for their physical appearance, mothers can and do become hypercritical of their daughters’ looks. Even today, I know many women who can trace a direct line between their insecurities about their appearance and their mothers’ own warped body image.

Q: There are many letters throughout the book between the characters. Are these letters based on actual letters from the time? Are any of them the letters that the historical figures wrote?

A: None of the letters in the novel are real, though the poem Branwell includes in his letter dated August 1, 1845, is. Eighteen letters written by Lydia are extant and part of the Robinson Papers collection at the Brontë Museum Parsonage. I was lucky enough to be able to read these. They are business letters written to the agent Lydia mentions employing in my chapter 16. From these I took her distinctive sign-off, “yours very truly,” and details about the honeymoon and the yacht meeting Lydia and Sir Edward in Marseilles, which shaped chapter 20 and Lydia’s final letter to Bessy.

Q: We can see from your novel that Charlotte Brontë originally published *Jane Eyre* under the pen name Currer Bell. Was it common for female authors at the time to publish under a male name? When was Charlotte revealed to be the author?

A: There are certainly many examples of women novelists from the nineteenth century hiding their identities by choosing to remain female but anonymous (Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* was described as “by a lady” on its publication in 1811) or by adopting a male persona (the option taken by the Brontës, George Eliot, and Louisa May Alcott, who often wrote as A. M. Barnard).

What’s unique about the Brontës was the huge level of public interest in discovering who the “Bells” were. Were there really three? Were they brothers? Sisters? A married couple writing together? Reviews were rife with argument and speculation about the writers’ (or writer’s?) gender(s).

Charlotte and Anne revealed their true identities by visiting their publisher in July 1848 (when Lydia is tending to a dying Lady Scott in my novel), but it wasn't until the publication of Charlotte's 1850 preface to a new edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* that most readers knew who the Brontës were. By then, both Emily and Anne had already died. Charlotte's characterization of her sisters formed the foundation of the so-called Brontë myth and has had a lasting impact on the family's depiction in popular culture.

Q: The role of women and the expectations placed on them, whether by men or by society, is prevalent in your novel. Why is this a subject you wanted to explore in such depth?

A: I am a woman, and so, unfortunately, these roles and expectations are something that I (and more than half the population) have to face all day, every day. I feel it would be impossible to write a novel with a woman main character, whether set today or in the past, that didn't touch on any of these issues.

Q: If it was indeed not Lydia who "brought down" the Brontë family, do you think any particular factor or factors led to their undoing?

A: The Brontë family's story is fascinating and tragic. The early loss of Mrs. Brontë and the two eldest sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, had a lasting impact on the Reverend Brontë and the four children who made it to adulthood—something I reference a few times through the course of my novel. There was extremely poor sanitation in Haworth, leading to many probably preventable deaths (just take a walk around the graveyard there to see the shocking gravestones with multiple names per family).

When it comes to Branwell, it is clear that he was troubled long before meeting Lydia. He'd failed in his dream of becoming a painter and had been dismissed from his job with the railway due to his excessive alcohol consumption. Blaming Lydia for what happened to Branwell (and the rest of his family) seems to me to be an archaic way of thinking. There's a clear gendered double standard in vilifying her for any sexual affair, and our understanding of the ravages of addiction is much more nuanced today.

Q: This story is told as a first-person narrative from Lydia's point of view. What made you choose this perspective rather than, say, a third-person narrative? What do you think we gain with this access into Lydia's mind, and why is that important for the story you tell?

A: I always knew I was going to write *Brontë's Mistress* in first person. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is written in the first person, and my novel is in some ways an answer to hers. Jane is poor, plain, young, and virginal. Lydia is wealthy, beautiful, older, and sexually experienced. But both characters have limited options open to them just because of their gender.

Because Lydia has so often been blamed for Branwell Brontë's demise, I thought it was important for readers to understand her position (even if they don't always agree with her actions). Lydia can be incredibly selfish. For instance when any of her servants are ill, she thinks first of the inconvenience to her. And she can be blind to just how good her life is (e.g., she compares herself to a slave going to the galleys when forced to endure an awkward Easter luncheon!).

But many people, whether they admit it or not, spend their lives obsessing over the petty and failing to see the bigger picture. In the last chapter, Lydia says, “There were women from here to England, crying over curtain fabric.” Curtain fabric isn’t just curtain fabric: it’s being trapped in a system where women have no property, power, or recourse to divorce and limited, superficial education. Flawed as Lydia is, I have empathy for her impossible position, and I hope others do too.

Q: Do you have any favorite books or movies that inspired you as you were writing *Bronte’s Mistress*?

A: I was of course inspired by the works of the Bronte sisters in writing the novel, especially Anne Bronte’s *Agnes Grey*, which was based in part on her time working at Thorp Green Hall, and Charlotte Bronte’s iconic *Jane Eyre*. Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina were important models for literary adulteresses. And I was also inspired by nineteenth-century American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” and by the 2016 film *Lady Macbeth*, both of which deal with the psychological impact of women’s limited choices during the Victorian period.

Q: Do you have a next project in mind? If so, can you share anything about it?

A: I *am* working on a new book! It’s also historical fiction, but set during a different time period and in a different country from *Bronte’s Mistress*, which has been a fun challenge. In both novels, I was inspired by the true stories of real women, though in this case, my main character was an artist in her own right, unlike Lydia.