



6700 Merle Hay Road, Johnston, IA 50131 • Voice: 515-278-5233 • Fax: 515-278-4975 • info@johnstonlibrary.org

Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Butcher by Joyce Carol Oates

Summary

In this harrowing story based on authentic historical documents, we follow the career of Dr. Silas Weir, “Father of Gyno-Psychiatry,” as he ascends from professional anonymity to national renown. Humiliated by a procedure gone terribly wrong, Weir is forced to take a position at the New Jersey Asylum for Female Lunatics, where he reigns. There, he is allowed to continue his practice, unchecked for decades, making a name for himself by focusing on women who have been neglected by the state—women he subjects to the most grotesque modes of experimentation. As he begins to establish himself as a pioneer of nineteenth-century surgery, Weir’s ambition is fueled by his obsessive fascination with a young Irish indentured servant named Brigit, who becomes not only Weir’s primary experimental subject, but also the agent of his destruction.

Narrated by Silas Weir’s eldest son, who has repudiated his father’s brutal legacy, *Butcher* is a unique blend of fiction and fact, a nightmare voyage through the darkest regions of the American psyche conjoined, in its startling conclusion, with unexpected romance. Once again, Joyce Carol Oates has written a spellbinding novel confirming her position as one of our celebrated American visionaries of the imagination.

Summary from www.Amazon.com

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the book's structure. Does the author use any narrative devices like flashbacks or multiple voices in telling the story? How does this affect the story and your appreciation of the book? Do you think the author did a good job with it? How do you think it might have been different if another character was telling the story?
2. Talk about the author's use of language/writing style. Have each member read his or her favorite passage out loud. (You might want to warn them ahead of time that they'll be doing this so they'll be prepared.) How does this particular passage relate to the story as a whole? Does it reveal anything specific about any of the characters or illuminate certain aspects of the story?
3. Talk about the time period in which the story is set. How well does the author convey the era? Did you have a sense of whether or not the author remained true to the events, social structures and political events of the time period?

4. Is this a time period that you knew a lot about before you read this book? If so, did you learn anything new? If not, did you come away with a greater understanding of what this particular time and place in history was actually like?
5. Is it difficult to keep our own, modern-day experiences from influencing the reading of a historical fiction tale? Can we imagine what life was really like for the characters within the context of the time period?
6. Compare this book to other works of historical fiction your group has read. Is it similar to any of them? Did you like it more or less than other books you've read? What do you think will be your lasting impression of the book?
7. Why do you suppose works of historical fiction are so popular with readers? What appeals to you the most about these types of books?
8. What did you like or dislike about the book that hasn't been discussed already? Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend? Do you want to read more work by this author?

Discussion Questions from www.readinggroupguides.com