

"A twisting tale of family secrets and unacknowledged desires."

—*The Sunday Times*

THE

UNSEEING

A NOVEL

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READING GROUP GUIDE

1. From the beginning, we know that the Edgeware Road murder is a huge case, drawing crowds of people with its sensational and gruesome story. Why do you think people are both repulsed and fascinated by true crime stories?
2. Sarah uses her routine to cope with the fear and isolation of Newgate. Imagine you were in a situation where you were cut off from society and those you loved. What would you do to pass the time? How would you cope?
3. Edmund Fleetwood, when talking to his wife, says, “Maybe in order to gain her trust, I need her to think I believe her.” Do you find this duplicitous? If you were in Edmund’s position, how would you get Sarah to tell her story?
4. When do you think Edmund crosses the line between pretending to believe Sarah Gale and actually believing? Do you think he ever truly does trust her? Do you?
5. At one point, while interrogating Sarah, Edmund tells himself that she does not look like a criminal, but then asks if it is really possible to tell. Do you think it is possible to tell who is a criminal? Do you think any person can become a criminal?

6. Imagine you are Edmund investigating all of the witnesses. Who do you believe? Who do you think is lying? What are their motives?
7. Sarah reflects on some horrible things that happened to her in childhood. Do you think what happens in childhood, good or bad, affects who we become later in life? Are we able to change? Has something from your own childhood, either positive or negative, affected you as an adult?
8. Do you think James Greenacre is a villain? Do you think Sarah is? Explain.
9. When reading *The Unseeing*, we learn a lot about the court system during this time period. Can you draw any parallels between the system in place in London and ours today? Do you think there is justice for the innocent and guilty? Is the system corrupt or in place to serve the people?
10. What did you make of Sarah's involvement with Arthur Fleetwood? How does it color Edmund's involvement with the case? What do you think of the father-son relationship here?
11. We discover that Sarah refused to defend herself to save her sister from the gallows and her son from destitution. Can you understand this? Is there someone who you would protect no matter what? Where do you draw the line?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

***The Unseeing* is based on a true case. How much of the story is fact and how much your own imagining?**

The Unseeing is very much a work of fiction inspired by a true crime. The newspaper excerpts that appear in the novel are real, as is much of the detail, but Edmund Fleetwood was not a real person, and while I know that Sarah Gale had a sister, I know almost nothing about her. The motivations I have given the key characters came partly from the historical documents, but partly from my own imaginings. At some points, I diverged from the known facts of the case in order to make the story more compelling and surprising. I agonized over this for many months, and it is one of the reasons that a key theme of the novel is truth/deception. Some people will criticize me for playing with the truth, but, ultimately, I'm a storyteller, not a historian.

What type of research went into this novel? Did you find it difficult to immerse yourself into this time period?

I started off by researching the case itself (through newspapers, the National Archives, Old Bailey online, convict records, and pamphlets), then the criminal justice system and Newgate prison. I read prison diaries and parliamentary commissions, I searched for sketches and pictures, and I studied plans of Newgate to get a sense of what that prison might have been like. In terms of the streets outside, I read journalistic works such as Henry

Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, the fiction of the period, guidebooks, newspaper reports, court reports, letters, and the journals and memoirs of those who lived in or visited London. Immersing myself in the time period wasn't really the difficult bit—it was leaving it. I realized I had to stop myself from researching and finish the darned book.

A lot of *The Unseeing* deals with the question of justice and what justice looks like. How would you define justice?

It's treating people fairly and transparently, not making decisions on the basis of preconceptions or prejudices. It's ensuring that all are equal before the law. That's far from the case in *The Unseeing*, of course, which is perhaps why I was attracted to the story in the first place.

Do you see any parallels between the justice system from your novel and our own current justice system?

In some ways, yes. The criminal justice system still has a long way to go in how it treats vulnerable people, the mentally ill, and victims of crime. There continues to be political and police corruption. The quality of legal representation you receive still depends on how much you can pay. But whatever we think of the justice system, we've come a long way from the early Victorian era!

Which character was your favorite to write?

It was Sarah. It took me a long time to get to know her, but, probably because of that, she's stayed with me. I also had a lot of fun with Morris, Edmund's clerk. I read lots of nineteenth-century slang to come up with his phrases.

What does your writing process look like?

It involves reading, writing, procrastinating, and panicking in about equal measure. The way I write has changed a lot as I've progressed as a writer, however. For *The Unseeing*, I created a relatively short synopsis and worked from that, but the novel changed drastically over the three and a half years in which I wrote the book, and I now know that I should have plotted it out in a far more detailed way and thought far more carefully about the characters' arcs. Every writer is different, but I think I work best when I know where I'm headed, even if the plot later changes. For my second novel, I'm working from a far more detailed plot structure.

Do you think, after the book ends, Sarah and George find a happy ending? What about Edmund?

I learned from newspaper reports that Sarah remarried in Australia and died an old woman, by which time she was respected within the community. Of course, I don't know whether that meant she was content, but it sounds like an improvement on her life in London. I would very much like to believe George led a long and happy life but have been unable to trace what happened to him. As for Edmund, I imagine him trying to make the best of things with Bessie and Clem, but I don't think he'll ever forget Sarah.

Who are some of your favorite authors?

Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, Sarah Waters, Shirley Jackson, Graham Greene. My favorite books generally have a crime at their center but aren't always classed as "crime" novels: they're explorations of why people end up committing terrible acts.

Are you working on anything new?

I'm currently writing my second historical crime novel, set on the Isle of Skye in 1857, a few years after the Highland Clearances. It's about a young woman named Audrey who goes to work for a collector of folklore and discovers that a young girl has gone missing, supposedly taken by spirits. Of course, that's not what she believes is going on. Again, the idea was sparked by a real case, but I haven't tried to base it on the case in the same way that I did with *The Unseeing*.