

THE CHAMPAGNE LETTERS

A Novel

A READING GROUP GUIDE


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INTRODUCTION

Reims, France, 1805: Barbe-Nicole Clicquot has just lost her beloved husband but is determined to pursue their dream of creating the premier champagne house in France, now named for her new identity as a widow: Veuve Clicquot. With the Russians poised to invade, competitors fighting for her customers, and the Napoleonic court politics complicating matters, she must set herself apart quickly and permanently if she, and her business, are to survive.

In present-day Chicago, broken from her divorce, Natalie Taylor runs away to Paris. In a book stall by the Seine, Natalie finds a collection of the Widow Clicquot's published letters and uses them as inspiration to step out of her comfort zone and create a new, empowered life for herself. But when her Parisian escape takes a shocking and unexpected turn, she's forced to make a choice. Should she accept her losses and return home, or fight for the future she's only dreamed about? What would the widow do?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The Widow Clicquot's first piece of advice to her great-granddaughter is to "know your own worth and tell your own stories." How accurate do you think Barbe-Nicole and Natalie are when they tell their own version of events? What story would you want to be told about you? How accurate do you think other's version of your life story would be?
 2. Overwhelmed by her divorce and having to sell her home, Natalie makes a split-second decision to run off to Paris. Do you believe this was the right choice for her? What does the opportunity of solo travel give her? How would the trip have been different if she had gone with her friend Molly? Have you ever traveled on your own? What was the experience like? If you could go somewhere now, where would you travel and why?
 3. Barbe-Nicole Clicquot states in one of her letters: "Seize opportunity when it comes, for unlike bad luck, it won't linger." What opportunities does the Widow seize in the book? Do you agree with her quick decisions? What opportunities have you seized? Are there any in retrospect you wish you had?
 4. Natalie has a makeover in France. When she goes to a lingerie store and chooses a bra, wondering what a possible partner might think of it, Sophie chastises her, saying: "The bra is not for someone else. It is for you. You should wear lovely things under your clothing so that you feel special, like a secret with your own heart...It's not about anyone else seeing it. It is about loving your body. It is about walking around in daily life knowing that you are beautiful and so you dress beautifully." Do you agree or disagree with Sophie? Do you feel women dress more for others than themselves? Does this change as they get older?
 5. When Natalie meets Gabriel, she notes that the fact of his attraction to her makes her see herself as more interesting. She states she had forgotten how intoxicating, how erotic it is to have someone's attention. For the first time in a long time, she feels that someone else is putting her needs above their own. Do you agree with her? How does the fact she felt overlooked in her marriage make her vulnerable now? Do you believe women have a tendency to put others first in relationships? If yes, why do you think that happens?
 6. Barbe-Nicole can solve her challenge with cloudy wine after a visit to a fortune-teller who advises that when things are upside down, they become clear. Natalie has the realization that only when her life is turned upside down can she clearly see the reality of her situation. Have you ever had things in your life fall apart, or turned upside down from your expectation, only to discover something about yourself that you never would have noticed otherwise?
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7. The Widow realizes that we often dislike other people because they mirror aspects of ourselves that we may not want to face or acknowledge. Barbe-Nicole dislikes that the Mouse/Margot will do almost anything to get ahead. Margot's ambition mirrors her own. Do you agree with the Widow's theory? Why or why not? If you think back on someone you haven't liked, is there anything about that individual that reflects aspects of you?
8. The Widow believes that the Mouse/Margot is a risk to her business and family reputation, and thus sets a trap to capture her maid in behavior that will justify ending her employment. Do you agree that in business, sometimes hard decisions such as this one have to be made for the greater good? Do you think a man would have struggled with the same decision? What do you think she should have done differently? Do you forgive her?
9. Natalie believes she fell for a con-artist scam because she wanted to believe the story she has been told by Gabriel and Sophie. Have you ever been reluctant to face a truth because you liked the story better? What makes people so vulnerable to romance and other catfishing scams?
10. Barbe-Nicole loves her daughter, but often feels that she isn't a great mother because she lacks an interest in traditional domestic tasks. Do you think she's a good mother? Has anything changed since the 1800s, or do women still feel torn between an interest in work and their responsibilities as parents?
11. Once Natalie knows she's been conned, she wants to find Gabriel because she believes that if she can make that situation right, it will balance out the betrayal that happened with her ex-husband. Do you understand her reasoning? Do you feel she really wants to punish Gabriel or her ex-husband at that moment? Have you ever had a similar experience?
12. Did you suspect Gabriel or Sophie? Which do you think is the worse betrayal and why? Do you agree with Natalie's feeling that she doesn't want Sophie to go to jail?
13. Barbe-Nicole turns down an early chance to marry her business partner's son and at the end of the book tells her great-granddaughter that while she had other relationships after losing her husband, she never seriously considered remarrying. Why do you think she makes this decision? Currently, statistics show that, after divorce, men are more likely to remarry than women. Why do you think that is? What do you believe are the pros and cons of marriage in today's world?
14. Friends are often the people who are not only there to support us but to also challenge us to be the best version of ourselves. Barbe-Nicole's friend, Louis, challenges her decision regarding the Mouse. Natalie's friend Molly tries to convince her to take the relationship with Gabriel slower. Both Barbe-Nicole and Natalie don't react well to their friends' advice. Why do each of them become so irritated? Have you ever had a similar conflict with a friend?
15. Barbe-Nicole tells her granddaughter it is difficulty that makes us grow. She talks about how a seed must rupture and fight its way through rock and dirt to become what it was destined to be. How did the challenges in her life make the Widow into the woman she became? How do you feel Natalie will be different following her divorce? Is there something difficult in your life that has led you to a better place?
16. At the end of the book, Natalie buys the emerald ring she believes might contain an emerald that once belonged to Barbe-Nicole. Do you think it is the same stone? Did you agree with Natalie's decision to leave the book of the Widow's letters behind? Natalie decides it doesn't matter if the ring contains the Widow's emerald because she is choosing to believe that it does. How does our belief about events affect our reactions?



ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Write a letter to your own future great-grandchild. What advice would you most want to pass down? Share your advice with the group.
2. Organize a wine tasting of the various wines mentioned in the book—Champagne, Sancerre, Bordeaux, and Beaujolais—and discuss which one is your favorite and why.
3. Organize a blind tasting of various sparkling wines—Champagne, Prosecco, Cava, Crémant, or Sparkling from another area (California, British Columbia, etc.). Which do you prefer?
4. Share with your group a woman you have admired and consider a mentor. What is it you admire about her? What is some of the best advice or guidance that you learned from her?
5. Barbe-Nicole goes to a fortune teller to find out what the future holds. Get a tarot card deck and do a three-card spread (one card each for the past, present, and future) for everyone. The decks contain a guide which can tell you what the various cards mean; or your group can hire your own fortune teller.
6. Molly tells Natalie that every day can be a champagne occasion. What is an occasion you would like to celebrate? From finishing a project at work to finally returning a call you've been dreading, share with the group one thing you're proud of recently and raise a toast to one another.
7. Create a food buffet for your book club with French cheeses, baguette, dried fruit, or any French recipes you've been waiting to try out.
8. Wine is often paired with food. Have some fun choosing what wine you would pair with a favorite book. Post your choice on social media with the hashtag **#bookpairing**

