



THE FORGOTTEN MIDWIFE BY LAURA ANTHONY

READING GROUP GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

New Jersey, 2023. Riley Carmichael is getting married and finally joining a huge, loving family. Yet she can't help but feel the emptiness of her own side of the church, save for her grandmother, Betty, whose late-stage dementia has started overtaking her mind. Full of questions about her heritage, Riley embarks on a trip to Ireland to find that elusive sense of home.

Tipperary, Ireland, 1954. When Margaret's older sister suddenly passes away, it falls to her to fulfill the family's commitment to the Church: the eldest daughter of the Lannigan family has joined the Sisters of Mercy nuns for generations. With no training or midwifery skills, she fights to provide the compassionate care she feels the nuns' charges—expectant mothers who fell pregnant outside of marriage—deserve amid the cruelty and abuse they face. When Margaret meets a young and terrified Delia O'Rourke, the sister of her childhood best friend, she must find the strength she needs to protect this young woman and her baby in the face of a system built to ensure they disappear...

TOPICS AND QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you think Grammy did the right thing by revealing the birth certificate to Riley in the months leading up to her wedding? Why or why not?
2. In Chapter 3, Sam asks Riley whether her mother, Stacey (Mary-Kate), knew she was adopted, and Riley realizes she doesn't know the answer. Do you think Derek and Betty ever told Stacey the truth? Why might they have guarded this information?
3. On the night Margaret is sent to the convent, her father is drunk and consumed by grief. If her parents had lived, do you believe Margaret's mother would have managed to convince her father to let Margaret come home, or was the decision inevitable regardless?
4. At the start of their friendship, Margaret loans Sister Joyce her beloved copy of *Little Women* to comfort her while she's missing her family. Have you ever read a book that brought you comfort during a difficult time, or helped you better understand your own life journey? What books have served as sources of solace in your own life?



5. When Margaret first enters the home for “fallen girls,” Tee tells her the best way to help the girls is to keep quiet. Do you think Tee’s advice comes more from a desire to comply, or a fear of the consequence if she doesn’t? Given the circumstances, do you think her advice was helpful? Have you ever found that staying silent is a more powerful tool than speaking up? If so, when?
6. After Rosie’s baby is born, her parents never come to take her home. Lucy faces the same fate and only leaves when her younger brother turns eighteen and comes for her. Do you believe their parents were aware of the conditions inside the Laundry? If so, why do you think they sent their daughters there anyway?
7. In Chapter 13, Riley and Sam stay at the Ballyvale Abbey Hotel—the former Laundry building now converted into a luxury hotel. If it were a real place, would you choose to stay there? Why or why not? Have you ever visited sites with dark historical significance? How did they make you feel? Describe the experience(s).
8. When Derek Carmichael visits Ballyvale to collect baby Mary-Kate, he comes alone. He is unaware that the adoptions are forced, and he cannot bear the thought of breaking Betty’s heart if they return home without a child. If he had known how desperately Delia wanted to keep her baby, do you think he would still have taken Mary-Kate? Or would that knowledge have changed his decision? Would it have changed your decision, if you were in his shoes?
9. Both Mr. Dolan and Doctor Henry want to help the girls. Mr. Dolan risks his livelihood to help them escape in his van, and Doctor Henry delivers Delia’s baby without seeking payment, even insisting he be called for future births. Yet neither man publicly exposes the atrocities at Ballyvale Abbey. Why do you think they remained silent? And how do you imagine carrying that secret affected them personally?
10. Over many months, Margaret, Mr. Dolan, and Delia secretly help several girls escape the Laundry. If you were one of the “fallen girls,” do you think you would have risked getting into the van, or would fear of the unknown—or worse punishment—have held you back?
11. In Chapter 63, Riley and Margaret meet for the first time. Although they are not related by blood, how is their connection as meaningful as Riley’s newfound relationship with her aunts and uncles and cousins? What do you imagine meeting Delia’s granddaughter meant to Margaret after all those years?
12. In 1976, Margaret leaves Ballyvale for the first time in twenty years and is shocked by how much the world has changed: “Everyone seems to have a car now. Women wear...skirts so short I can see halfway up their thighs.” When she leaves Ballyvale for good four years later, do you think she would have thrived in the modern world? Or struggled to adapt after so many years of confinement?



ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. What is the symbolic significance of magpies in the novel?
2. How did the contemporary framing of the novel influence your understanding of it and ability to connect to the story? Why do you think it's important to find creative ways to honor and explore our histories—even the challenging parts?
3. How does the novel explore the meaning of family—both that which we are born into, and that which we choose?
4. If you could have a conversation with one of the girls in Ballyvale Abbey, who would you choose and why?

FURTHER READING, WATCHING & LISTENING

The Forgotten Midwife is inspired by real historical events in Ireland. To learn more about the Magdalene Laundries or other aspects of the story, here are a few of the books, movies, and podcasts author Laura Anthony recommends.

READ: *Republic of Shame*, a powerful book by investigative journalist Caelainn Hogan, provided an invaluable foundation for *The Forgotten Midwife*. Hogan's meticulous research into Ireland's mother and baby homes (and industrial schools) left a profound mark on me while I was writing. She follows the buried paper trail, gathers testimonies, and exposes the true horrors of the system. If moments in *The Forgotten Midwife* feel difficult to read, it's important to stress that Hogan's work is nonfiction. The atrocities she documents are real and detailed. Her book is devastating and unforgettable, and I remain deeply moved by it.

I first read June Goulding's memoir, *The Light in the Window*, when I was a teenager and was struck by her empathy. Reading again recently, I found an even deeper appreciation for her courage and compassion. Goulding didn't just care for "fallen girls," she did so in the face of unthinkable obstacles. Margaret and Tee's experiences in the birthing room were certainly influenced by Goulding's tender account. Goulding's book offers a gentle lens into these institutions for those who may find this dark side of history overwhelming.

WATCH: The film *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002) left a lasting impression on me. Watching, I was struck not only by the suffering and power imbalance, but also by the small, stubborn acts of solidarity between the girls.

Philomena (2013) is an adaptation of *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee* by Martin Sixsmith starring Judi Dench. This film broke my heart. Highly recommended for those interested in the legacy of forced adoptions at the Magdalene Laundries.

LISTEN: *The Home Babies* is a powerful podcast from BBC Radio 4 delving into conversations of who knew what, and how such cruelty hid in plain sight.

The podcast *The Magdalenes and I*, hosted by Steven O'Riordan and featuring interviews with survivors, has irrevocably affected me. I am in awe of the women who share raw accounts of their lived experiences of a history almost too painful to imagine.