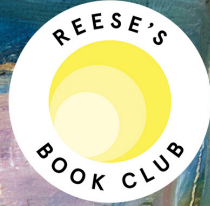


THE TRIAL THAT HAS *RIVETED* THE WHOLE COUNTRY!

IN HER DEFENSE

By Philippa Malicka • On Sale February 3, 2026



IN HER DEFENSE

A Novel

PHILIPPA MALICKA

WHAT *REALLY* HAPPENED TO MARY IN ROME?



Everyone is watching...

Only one person knows the truth!

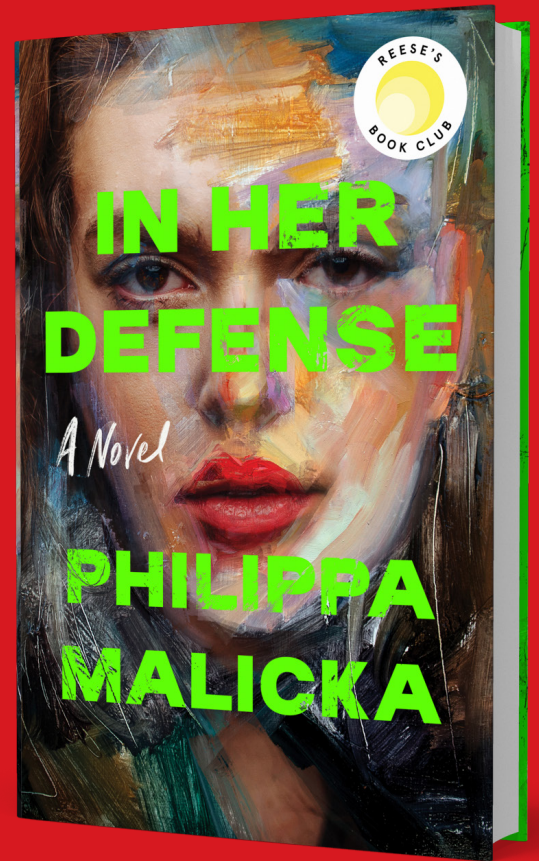
“Lust, trust, friendship and betrayal!”

—Erin Kelly, internationally bestselling author of *He Said/She Said*



FORMER EMPLOYEE HOLDS THE KEY TO UNRAVELING THE TANGLED WEB OF LIES AND DECEIT!

This reading group guide for ***In Her Defense*** includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. 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

In Her Defense is a psychological suspense novel that follows the trial of television star and beloved celebrity Anna Finbow versus therapist Jean Guest, who Anna is accusing of brainwashing her daughter Mary into isolating herself from her family. Augusta “Gus” Bird, recently hired by the Finbows as their dogsitter, appears to be an innocent bystander caught in the crosshairs of the trial. But as the trial unfolds, we discover just how far back Gus’s connection goes to both Mary and Jean Guest, and how her involvement is at the center of it all, taking us on a journey to Rome and the world of art school. And when Gus is finally called to the stand, she must decide whether or not to tell the true story.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1.** Introducing the reader to Anna Finbow, the narrator, Gus, says “there is always a ‘them’ and always an ‘us’” (p. 4). What does this tell us about how Gus sees herself in comparison to Anna? How do you, the reader, see yourself in comparison to Gus and Anna?
- 2.** A big theme in the book is how we perceive people. How do you perceive Jean and how do you interpret her motives? Do you see her as “a modern-day cult leader”? Do you think she is just doing what she does for money, or do you think there’s a part of her that does want to help people?
- 3.** Much of Gus’s pull towards Jean has to do with aesthetics; when she first meets Jean, she describes her “orange velvet house slippers” (p. 121) and her “beautiful living room” (p. 122) and how “in her immaculate presence, I felt instantly grubby” (p. 121). Why do you think Gus is so drawn in by these things? How does Jean use this to her advantage?
- 4.** The author cleverly structures this story to hide Gus’s past with Mary and Jean in Rome in part 1. Why do you think she structures the novel in this way? How would the novel be different if we knew this information from the beginning?
- 5.** Another big theme in this book is the idea of “owing debt.” Gus feels indebted to Jean because Jean is giving her therapy even though Gus can’t afford to pay for it. She also feels indebted to the Finbows for giving her a job and letting her into their home. How does class play into that? How does this impact Gus’s decisions?
- 6.** On page 267, Anna calls Gus a “leech,” which seems to really stick with Gus. Discuss what it means to be a leech and why you think this had such an impact on Gus.
- 7.** Art plays a big role in this novel; Mary, Gus, and Anna are all artists. What did you think is the importance of this?
- 8.** On page 227, when Gus sees the portrait Mary painted of her, she hates the way she is depicted, saying “the shock of how wrong it was brought tears to my eyes.” But then, on page 325, when she sees it again, she sees it in a whole new way. Why do you think she sees it differently the second time?
- 9.** At the end of part 4, when Gus is wondering how the sketch artist depicted her, she envisions herself as “[a] somebody. Whatever may be said of me, however I will be sketched, not a nobody” (p. 318). How do you think this captures Gus’s preoccupation with how she’s perceived? How is this different or the same as how she wants to be perceived in Mary’s portrait?



- 10.** At the end of the trial, Gus is faced with the difficult decision of upholding her lie or telling the truth. Do you think she made the right decision? Do you think there was a right decision?
- 11.** The truth behind the trial is complicated. Who do you think should have won the trial based on the evidence that is given? Who do you think should have won the trial based on everything you know?
- 12.** What do you think of Lawrence's ending? Do you think he got what he deserved? Why do you think the author decided to give his character this ending?
- 13.** Consider the title of the novel *In Her Defense*. Who do you think this book is a case in defense of? Is it multiple people?
- 14.** Trust is a central theme of the novel. In a novel story full of lies and half-truths, which characters do you trust, if any? How can you determine who can be trusted? Do you believe Gus's version of events by the end?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

- 1.** Our culture is known to be obsessed with celebrity trials, like the one at the center of this novel. Choose a famous celebrity trial and look back at the articles or media made about it. How were they skewing your perception of the story? How do you think the trial in this book would have been portrayed in the media if it were happening in real life?
- 2.** Watch a documentary or docuseries about a cult leader or con artist. What similarities do you see between this person and Jean Guest? How were people manipulated by this person? How is that similar to what was happening with Gus and Mary? Refer to the *New Yorker* article ["What Makes a Cult a Cult"](#) as a helpful resource to deepen your understanding of the definition of cult.
- 3.** Choose someone in the book club to paint a portrait of. Don't worry about artistic talent! What are the specific things you notice about the other person? Afterward, everyone can discuss the experience of drawing someone and of being drawn.
- 4.** There seems to be a growing fear of children cutting off their parents, as evident from a recent *New Yorker* article ["Why So Many People Are Going 'No Contact' With Their Parents"](#). Discuss what you make of this "phenomenon" and how it connects to the novel.

