

"Harrowing, gripping, and beautiful."
—LAURA DAVE, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Last Thing He Told Me*

THE FOUNDLING

A NOVEL

ANN
LEARY

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



READING
GROUP
GUIDE

This reading group guide for *The Foundling* 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 1927 Pennsylvania, Mary Engle's life changes forever when she lands a secretarial job with a pioneering institution, the Nettleton State Village for Feebleminded Women of Childbearing Age, under the employ of renowned psychologist Dr. Agnes Vogel. Orphaned at a young age, Mary finds a mentor and idol in Dr. Vogel and quickly adapts to life in the Village, making friends and even finding love in the surrounding town. Then one day, she recognizes a young woman, Lillian Faust, whom she grew up with in her orphanage and is now an inmate at the Village. Everything Mary has come to believe about Dr. Vogel and Nettleton is called into question, and she is forced to make a choice between rescuing Lillian and the future Dr. Vogel has promised her. Mary learns of the dark secrets of the Village and the eugenic ideology Dr. Vogel espouses.

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION



1 When we first meet Dr. Vogel on page 7, she uses many dog whistles in her speech that alert the reader that she's talking about eugenics and that her practices and positions betray a dehumanizing view of people with mental disabilities. What phrases did you pick up on as suspicious or concerning? What made them stick out to you? How do you pick up on language like this in everyday life?

2 On page 77, Dr. Vogel explains to Mary, "Wild antelope drive the genetically weak, aged, or inferior members away, for the health of the rest of the herd. . . . Of course, we're not animals. . . . We must look after our weak and afflicted." How has eugenics historically couched racism, ableism, and sexism in compassion? What remnants can you find in modern-day life and language?

3 On page 96, Jake and Mary talk about how women labeled "feeble-minded" aren't allowed to marry, and on page 123, Lillian mentions that if Vogel acknowledged that some women didn't have mental defects, she'd have to pay them. Research laws in your state or country surrounding people with disabilities and marriage and labor laws. What parallels do you see between now and a century ago when *The Foundling* is set?

4 On page 140, Mary grapples with the revelation that Lillian is not "feeble-minded" and tries to reconcile what she sees as opposing truths. "[Lillian] was so drunk one night that she was raped by one man. Another made her pregnant before she was married. Is that normal? I can't begin to imagine what might happen to her if she were allowed back out on her own again." Discuss Mary's view of these events. Why does she work so hard to discredit her friend on behalf of Dr. Vogel? What role does Mary's guilt play in her journey to understand what's happening at Nettleton?

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION



5 In the end, Lillian was “killed” in the midst of her escape, but her death led to a police investigation and the revelation of conditions at Nettleton. On page 308, a member of the board of trustees, Eloise Howell, says, “The condition in which we found the girls and women . . . Well, it’s something I’ll never forget.” Considering one of the board members, Mr. Whitcomb, had perpetrated violence against several of the women at Nettleton and been paid off, do you believe that Eloise Howell and others actually didn’t know what was happening at Nettleton? Discuss the responsibility of those in power to ask questions of the institutions they support and profit from.

6 Dr. Vogel idolizes female suffragists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Susan B. Anthony. Do some research into their beliefs compared to other contemporaries, such as Anna Julia Cooper. Do you think they would have approved of Dr. Vogel’s ideas of “feeble-mindedness”? How do your opinions compare to theirs? and language?

7 Some of the reasons women were imprisoned in Nettleton State Village and labeled “feeble-minded” are very loose or ill-defined, such as “insubordination” or “telling lies.” What does this tell you about how they defined not only women with mental disabilities but those without? Could any of these traits of “feeble-mindedness” be used against you?

8 Nettleton State Village was funded by the government and yet also turned a profit selling dairy products as well as the labor of its inmates. It was also heavily funded by people, like Mr. Whitcomb, who had a vested interest in keeping the institution going. How does this structure rely on exploitation and people in power turning a blind eye? Discuss the ongoing use of penitentiaries as profit systems.

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB



1 *The Foundling* is based in part on the author's true family history. Research your own local history and see if any similar institutions once existed in your area. Were there similar scandals there?

2 The IQ test issued to women to judge them "feeble-minded" is still pervasive in the collective consciousness. Research the origins of the test and try some of the questions. Does this seem like an adequate measure of your ability to make decisions for yourself? How does the persistence of the belief in such tests speak to the difficulty of changing public opinion, even after so much time?

3 Watch the PBS documentary *The Eugenics Crusade*. How does the plot of *The Foundling* fit into the history of eugenics in the United States? Discuss the continuing legacy of eugenics and how it has adapted over time.