

THE INVITATION

BOOK CLUB QUESTIONS



WARNING: SPOILERS BELOW

1. The Gilded Age was a time of unimaginable excess for the wealthy few. Caroline and Oliver Hopper live in a mansion on Fifth Avenue which is a replica of a French Renaissance palace and boasts original artworks by Boucher and antiques that once belonged to Marie Antoinette. How does money corrupt the characters in the book?
2. The lives of the high-society women in the novel revolve around a relentless social schedule and constant pressure to keep up appearances. Would life have been oppressive, superficial and boring for many women of the era, despite their immense wealth? Which is better, the lives of Caroline and Grace in New York, Emma in Paris, or Florence and Cecilia in New York?
3. Marriage features heavily in the novel. Emma's longing for the security of marriage with Claude, the arranged marriage of Isadora and the Duke, Caroline and Oliver's business-like marriage, Grace and Harland Hunter's loveless marriage. Discuss the different attitudes to and experiences of marriage in the book.

4. Caroline is a fascinating character. As a very ambitious woman in 1899 there aren't many outlets for her to exercise her ambition, so her only way to wield power is through high society and her family, with some very negative consequences. Do you think if Caroline was a woman in contemporary America things would have turned out differently, given the opportunity and freedom to be anything she wanted to be? And if Caroline's character were a man would her personality be more palatable?
5. A recent study suggested that as many as one in five corporate CEOs have the traits of a psychopath. They come across as charming, gregarious, but underneath there's a profound lack of remorse and empathy. They have certain characteristics like fearless dominance, boldness and a lack of emotion. Based on these qualities, is Caroline a psychopath?
6. Discuss the ways in which art provides an outlet or escape from New York society ('a world within a world') for both Emma and, especially, Isadora. Contrast the way they engage with art and history with the ways in which other women in high society consume it. How, in the novel, is art shown to be potentially a force for good?
7. As a person it is hard to like Caroline, given her actions, but as a character did you enjoy her? What is your reaction to Caroline's final move in the book – becoming a champion of the rights of women and the poor?
8. How much of Caroline's actions are informed by her experience as a child? And how does her view of the sisters' childhood differ from Emma's?
9. Emma finds herself in a world of astonishing wealth and is at first seduced by the luxury; however, this lifestyle comes at a price. Do you think Emma should have left when she first started seeing the extent of Caroline's manipulation or was there too much at stake?
10. It has been suggested that we are currently going through another Gilded Age, with increasing disparity between rich and poor. Antila, the world's

first billion-dollar home, built in Mumbai, India, has definite echoes of the over-the-top mansions of the Gilded Age. What other signs in today's world suggest another Gilded Age?

11. Harland Hunter's character is in part inspired by real life architect and darling of Gilded Age New York's social scene Stanford White, responsible for buildings such as Madison Square Garden and Washington Square Arch. What do you think happened to Harland? Is there more to it than meets the eye?

12. Early in the novel, Emma is clearly torn between her enjoyment of a bohemian lifestyle in Paris and a desire for a more stable, conventional life with Claude. How do think her time in New York, and especially her encounters with the Confirmed Bachelor Girls, changes this? And, looking beyond the end of the story, what life choices do you think Emma is likely to make in the future?