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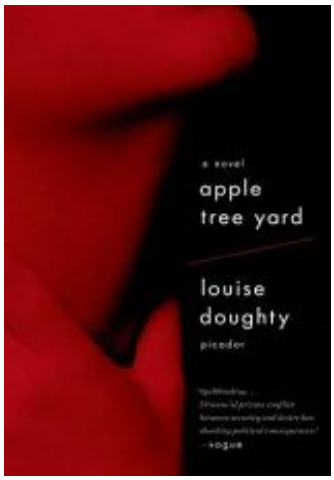
Apple Tree Yard

by Louise Doughty



About the Book

An intelligent, erotically charged thriller with deep moral implications.

Yvonne Carmichael, a renowned geneticist, public authority, and happily married mother of two, sits in the witness box. The charge is murder. Across the courtroom, not meeting her eye, sits her alleged accomplice. He wears the beautiful pin-striped suit he wore on their first meeting in the Houses of Parliament, when he put his hand on her elbow and guided her to a deserted chapel, where she began to undress. As the barrister's voice grows low and sinuous, Yvonne realizes she's lost herself and the life she'd built so carefully to a man who never existed at all.

After their first liaison, Yvonne's lover tells her very little about himself, but she comes to suspect his secrecy has an explanation connected with the British government. So thrilled and absorbed is she in her newfound sexual power that she fails to notice the real danger about to blindside her from a seemingly innocuous angle. Then, reeling from an act of violence, Yvonne discovers that her desire for justice and revenge has already been compromised. Everything hinges on one night in a dark little alley called Apple Tree Yard.

Suspenseful, erotically charged and masterfully paced, Louise Doughty's APPLE TREE YARD is an intelligent psychological thriller about desire and its consequences by a writer of phenomenal gifts.

Discussion Guide

1. APPLE TREE YARD opens with a prologue that situates us very close to the end of the story. Why does the author choose to begin here rather than at some other point --- for example, the day Yvonne Carmichael and her lover first meet? How does Doughty use the prologue to introduce characters, structure the plot, and create suspense?

2. The story of Yvonne and Mark is told in three parts, all titled with letters: X and Y; A, T, G and C; and DNA. What is the significance of each of these titles? How are they symbols that define the main characters and the underlying themes

of truth and self-deception?

3. There are places in the narrative where Yvonne takes great care in describing her appearance --- her clothing and footwear, hair, makeup, etc. Where do these descriptions occur? What do they reveal about Yvonne's state of mind and her values, hopes, and concerns?

4. How does Yvonne describe her lover and their first meeting? What are some words and images that, perhaps, give away more than she intends? Why does she call him X? As you read her first e-mail to him, what did you think would happen in this story?

5. Do Yvonne and Guy have a good marriage? Is Guy supportive of Yvonne's career? What is his attitude toward infidelity? Is it surprising that their marriage survives Yvonne's affair, trial, and imprisonment?

6. How do Yvonne's interactions and conversations with her adult children and her best friend, Susannah, illuminate her character?

7. After Yvonne is attacked, Mark Costley seems deeply and genuinely concerned about her. Does his behavior contradict how he treated her and managed their time together before the events in chapter 8? What does it say about the kind of husband and father he might be?

8. Why did Yvonne decide not to press charges against George Craddock? Might she have made a different decision if she did not think that Craddock knew about her affair? How do you feel about the decision at the conclusion of the scene where she meets with Kevin?

9. By her own admission, Yvonne waits a long time while Mark Costley is in George Craddock's flat. What is her explanation for why she does this, for why, in fact, she does everything Mark tells her to do that afternoon? How does her version of this part of the story differ from the prosecuting attorney's? Which version is closer to the truth?

10. We do not learn that Yvonne's lover is named Mark Costley until the beginning of the trial. Why is this detail withheld? How does not knowing his name affect our experience of the story and what we believe or do not believe about Mark? Is there significance to his name?

11. During the trial, Witness G testifies for the prosecution that Mark Costley was rejected by the national security service because he was assessed to have "difficulties distinguishing the boundaries between truth and fiction." What are some indications this might also be true of Yvonne?

12. At the trial, Yvonne hears evidence that suggests Mark was not in love with her but was using her (as he used many other women) to play out his fantasies of a more dangerous and interesting life. Yet he killed the man who raped her. Is this because he truly loved her or was it an extension of his fantasy life that got out of control?

13. APPLE TREET YARD is the story of a woman who makes bad choices. She begins an affair with a total stranger who insists on having sex in public places. She declines to press charges against a man who violently rapes her, then encourages her lover to confront her attacker. After she and her lover are arrested for murder, she agrees to a plan to hide

their relationship, which involves lying to her lawyers and the court. How does all of this fit with Yvonne's image of herself as a happily married successful professional? What is her worst sin: infidelity, secrecy, perjury, or murder? What are her motivations?

14. In the final pages of APPLE TREE YARD, Yvonne reveals two secrets. First, that the document containing her e-mails to X/Mark has been deleted, but not by her. Second, that when Mark took her to the flat she thought was a safe house, she told him she wanted him to kill George Craddock, to "smash his face in." Do these revelations change anything you believed to be true about Yvonne? What do they say about her relationships with Guy and Mark?

15. The phrase "There's something I haven't told you" is central to the outcome of the trial. What are some of the many things that the characters in APPLE TREE YARD do not tell each other? What are the consequences? Why does Yvonne tell us that "relationships are about stories, not truth"?

Author Bio

Louise Doughty's novel WHATEVER YOU LOVE was short-listed for the Costa Book Award and long-listed for the Orange Prize for Fiction. She is the author of several other novels and a book of nonfiction, A NOVEL IN A YEAR, based on her hugely popular newspaper column. She also writes plays and journalism and broadcasts regularly for BBC Radio 4. Doughty lives in London.

Critical Praise

"There can't be a woman alive who hasn't once realized, in a moment of panic, that she's in the wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong man. Louise Doughty, more sure-footed with each novel, leads her unnerved reader into dark territory. A compelling and bravely written book."
—Hilary Mantel, author of WOLF HALL and BRING UP THE BODIES

"At the start of Louise Doughty's taut and psychologically persuasive novel we find [Yvonne] taking the witness stand at the Old Bailey, accused of complicity in a violent crime and about to be exposed in a highly damaging and compromising lie . . . This is a novel that explores the ease with which we can stray off our safe, familiar paths and become addicted to the stories we tell about ourselves. A disquieting, perceptive and gripping read."
—Amber Pearson, *Daily Mail*

"Doughty controls the progress of this narrative beautifully, parsing out information with tantalising hints at what is to come . . . APPLE TREE YARD is a chilling novel, in part because of the unsparing light it shines on our ability to deceive ourselves. Doughty has a particular gift for unsettling stories, for making us ask difficult questions of ourselves . . . and this is her strongest book yet. It's not a comfortable read, but it is entirely compelling."
—Stephanie Merritt, *The Observer* (London)

“Doughty is a brilliant storyteller who knows how to build the suspense to breaking point.”
—Kate Saunders, *The Times* (London)

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Publication Date: January 13, 2015
Genres: Fiction, Psychological Suspense, Psychological Thriller, Suspense, Thriller
Paperback: 336 pages
Publisher: Picador
ISBN-10: 1250062039
ISBN-13: 9781250062031