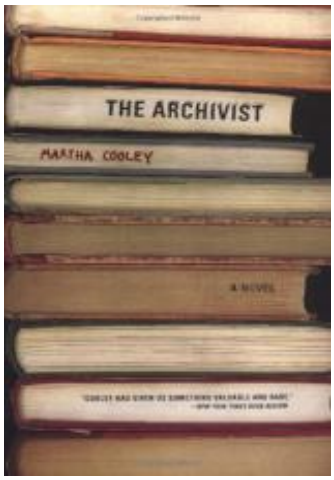
The Archivist

by Martha Cooley



About the Book

Matthias is a librarian, a man of orderly ways, responsible for safeguarding a sealed cache of T. S. Eliot's letters. Roberta is a young poet with an unabashed and oddly intense interest in the letters. What begins as a battle of wills soon evolves into an unlikely friendship-a relationship that not only unsettles Matthias's solitary life but forces him to confront long-buried memories of his wife, her mental breakdown, and the dissolution of their marriage. Propelled by startling truths hidden and revealed, this extraordinary novel draws richly upon the poems of T. S. Eliot and the intellectual and social climate of postwar New York City as it explores the redemptive power of art and the challenge of forging a moral and meaningful life in the modern world.

Discussion Guide

1. Matt seems to have found the perfect profession for himself -- an introvert with an incredible respect for books and literature should, of course, be an archivist. It was quite shocking, then, that he would betray his passion by burning the Hale letters. How does he let us know that this betrayal is what needs to be done?

2. What, exactly, do you think is at the core of Judith's paranoia? She didn't know the reality of her parents' demise until just before she took her life, but it is as if she had an inkling all along. Was it this sense that made her different from other Americans hearing of war-torn Europe? Was it perhaps this unknown connection that forced her to take it all so personally? Can we account for Judith's obsession?

3. T. S. Eliot's contradictions are cited more than once in the book ("Teach us to care and not to care"; "Time the destroyer is time the preserver") and are one of the reasons Judith and Matt admire him. How does this relate to this work as a whole? Think specifically about betrayal versus trust.

4. One vital message addresses the importance of our religious roots. Judith and Roberta both suffered as a result of

religious lies. It was perhaps the most important factor in Judith's undoing, and the driving force for most of Roberta's actions. Do you think it's realistic that religion plays such a large role in the lives of the characters? What role does religion play in your own life?

5. We are all products of our experience. When Matt and Roberta speculate about T. S. Eliot's reasons for institutionalizing his wife and converting to the Anglican Church (p. 38), how do their experiences influence their speculations?

6. The character development of Lottie and Sam so late in the book is fascinating, as we already know so many of the players. With whom do your sympathies lie, Lottie and Sam, or Carol and Len?

7. Although Matt suffers from a guilty conscience, he acknowledges that even in hindsight he wouldn't have done things differently for Judith. How much do you think Matt's attraction to solitude plays a role in his actions?

8. Matt's disdain for his mother's brand of Christianity leads to what he calls his own deity -- a combination of both parents' beliefs. How does his God serve him?

9. What are the extent of Matt's feelings for Roberta? Is he in love with her?

10. The ultimate contradiction in life, betrayal versus trust, is the underlying theme of this book. We see betrayal take many forms: religion, relationships, profession, self. What we are left with at the end of the book, however, is a sense of well-being. How does the author make this happen?

Author Bio

Martha Cooley lives in Brooklyn, New York, and teaches in the Bennington Writing Seminars and the master's program in creative writing at Boston University.

Critical Praise

" It is rare and gratifying to read a novel about people who take literature seriously. . . . *The Archivist* is a memorable achievement. "

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Publication Date: April 8, 1999
Paperback: 336 pages
Publisher: Back Bay Books
ISBN-10: 0316158461
ISBN-13: 9780316158466