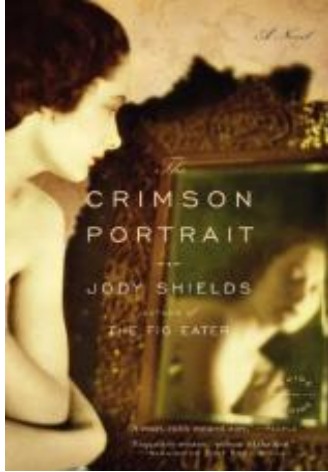


# The Crimson Portrait

by Jody Shields

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## About the Book

Spring 1915. On a sprawling country estate not far from London a young woman mourns her husband, fallen on the battlefields of what has been declared the first World War...

But the isolated and eerie stillness in which she grieves is shattered when her home is transformed into a bustling military hospital to serve the war's most irreparably injured. Disturbed by the intrusion of the suffering men and their caretakers, the young widow finds unexpected solace in the company of a wounded soldier whose face, concealed by bandages, she cannot see. Their affair takes an unexpected turn when fate presents her with an opportunity: to remake her lover --- with the unwitting help of a visionary surgeon and an American woman artist --- in the image of her lost husband.

Inspired by the little-known but extraordinary collaboration between artists and surgeons in the treatment of wounded men in the First World War, **The Crimson Portrait** peels back layers of suspense and intrigue to illuminate the abiding mysteries of identity and desire.

## Discussion Guide

1. Dr. McCleary's first order of business as he sets out to transform the estate into a hospital is to remove all of the mirrors and reflective objects. Do you think this is fair to the soldiers? Would you want to see what you looked like if you were in the soldiers' position? What do you imagine it would be like to live in a home without mirrors?
2. The death of Catherine's husband propels her into an emotional crisis. To what extent do you think the particular nature of Catherine's response is attributable to her personality? To what extent is it attributable to the social mores of the time relating to unmarried women?

3. The image of light refracting (whether through mirrors, chandeliers, or bodies of water) recurs throughout the book. What do you think these images represent? Are they intrinsic to the story? What might the author be intending to communicate through them?

4. Both Dr. McCleary and Dr. Kazanjian enjoy talking about the myriad muscles that exist within the face and about how intricately constructed a body part the face is. There are also quite vivid descriptions of injuries, both suffered and imagined, throughout the book. Did you enjoy the passages relating to medical matters? Did you feel that these passages enhanced or impeded the story?

5. World War I is a rich setting for any novel. Why do you think the author chose to have it take place away from the front lines? Do you think that **The Crimson Portrait** is in fact a book about war?

6. Anna and Catherine are representative of two very different types of women of their era. Do you feel that this is why they have a hard time getting along with each other, or is there something else that prevents them from growing close? Discuss the contrasts between the two women's lives.

7. Do you consider Catherine's actions in her relationship with Julian ultimately selfish, or understandable given her emotional condition?

8. At one point in the novel Catherine says to Dr. McCleary, "Someday my house will be quiet again. Although it will always be haunted by suffering" (page 173). He responds by telling Catherine that she creates "her own ghosts." Which one of them do you agree with?

9. Artis forms strong bonds with many of the doctors in the hospital, though especially with Dr. McCleary. Given their relationship, how do you interpret Dr. McCleary's actions in the wake of Artis's being drafted?

10. The nurses and orderlies stay mostly on the sidelines of the story, although, clearly, like the novel's principal characters, they are not immune to the tragedy and the emotions of the war. Select and discuss passages in which the nurses' or orderlies' experiences are brought to the novel's foreground. What role do these scenes play in the novel?

## Author Bio

Jody Shields is the author of *THE FIG EATER*, *THE CRIMSON PORTRAIT* and *THE WINTER STATION*. Formerly Design Editor of the *New York Times* magazine and a Contributing Editor of *American Vogue*, Shields is also a screenwriter and a collected artist. She is a resident of New York City.

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# **The Crimson Portrait**

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