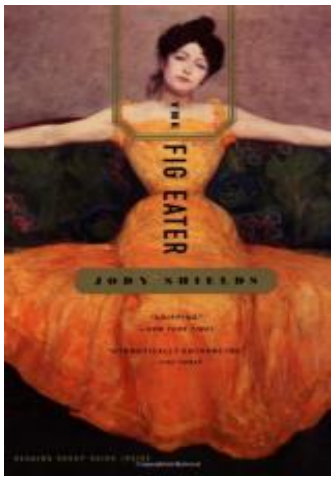
ReadingGroupGuides
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The Fig Eater

by Jody Shields



About the Book

Vienna, 1910. The hunt for a killer begins in the darkness of a hot August night, when an eighteen-year-old girl named Dora (loosely inspired by Freud's famous patient) is found brutally murdered near the Imperial Palace. . . .

At once a page-turning tale of murder, sleuthing, and sexual secrets and a rich, glittering evocation of a city and a culture in fateful transition, The Fig Eater is one of the most talked-about literary debuts of recent years.

Discussion Guide

1. Why is Erszébet so interested in investigating Dora's murder? What motivates her?

2. What is the relationship between Erszébet and Wally? What role do they play in each other's lives?

3. How do Erszébet and the Inspector approach crime-solving? How do the male and female approaches differ?

4. Who did you suspect of the murder? Did your suspicions change at various points in the story?

5. The real Dora, Freud's patient, was seduced by her father's friend Herr K. In exploring women's psychology and sexuality, Jody Shields takes the seduction one step further and turns it into murder. Discuss the symbolism of seduction leading to murder.

6. Are the rules of investigation, as stated in the System der Kriminalistik, still relevant today? Are they followed today? Which ones struck you as particularly crucial to Dora's case?

7. Erszébet and the Inspector's marriage has many ups and downs. Explore these in relation to their separate

investigations of the murder. When are they close? When are they distant?

8. What is the role of food in *The Fig Eater*, particularly as it figures in the relationships between the characters? What about hunger?

9. In what ways is sexuality constrained in the characters' lives? How does the repression of sexuality manifest itself?

10. Think about the notion of parallels and doubles in the book: the double investigation, rational versus mystical, truth and lies, bourgeois propriety versus sexuality. How does Shields play these off each other?

11. What is the historical significance of figs? How does their presence and the knowledge of them as a major part of the story (from the title) affect your reading?

12. Discuss how photographs and photography figure in the novel. What role does Egon play? What powers does he attribute to photographs?

13. What is the significance of the time period, the turn of the century? Think about the mixing of old and new worlds, including ways of thinking.

14. What kind of writer is Jody Shields? Does her style remind you of any other writers?

15. Whom would you cast in the film?

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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