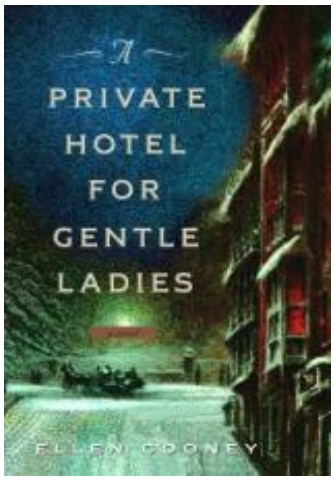
A Private Hotel for Gentle Ladies

by Ellen Cooney



About the Book

A Private Hotel for Gentle Ladies is an irresistible tale of a woman's search for self?a journey that takes her to the most surprising places. The book takes place in February 1900 in a small Massachusetts town blanketed with snow. Red-haired Charlotte is married to an heir of the powerful Heath family. Upon spying her husband embracing another woman, she flees both him and the luxurious, stifling life of the Heath household for "The Beechmont: A Private Hotel for Gentle Ladies," a unique Boston establishment whose handsome porters make discreet, late-night visits to its female clientele. Charlotte is quickly swept up in a sexual awakening that in turn leads her on a journey to understand her own marriage and ultimately to discover where, if anywhere, she truly belongs.

Discussion Guide

1. Of **A Private Hotel for Gentle Ladies**, Ellen Cooney has said "I wanted to write about winter because it's my favorite season and I love to work with snow and ice, and with things melting. I guess if this novel does anything, it freezes and melts." Describe the various things that freeze over and then melt in this novel.

2. How has Charlotte's childhood, including her schooling and being raised an orphan, affected her personality and desires as an adult? What does the novel say about natural expressions of female desire, especially in an age of repression?

3. Discuss issues of safety in this novel. With whom does Charlotte feel safe? With whom does she not? What causes her to feel insecure or unstable? How does this change by the end of the novel?

4. Is feeling safe connected to being stifled in the Heath household? Discuss captivity versus independence in the context of this novel. Besides the Heath mansion itself what else limits and stifles Charlotte? Why does she place so much importance on wanting a household of her own, against her husband's wishes? Do you think she would be happy alone

with Hays?

5. Describe Charlotte's relationship with the various men in the novel. Compare/contrast Arthur Pym and Hays Heath. Are there any similarities between the two men? Why is Charlotte attracted to each of them? What about Harry Alcorn and Dickie? What does she admire or like in these two men? Do differences of class and wealth come into play?

6. Compare Charlotte with the other women in the novel?the Heath sisters and mother, Aunt Lily, the other guests at the hotel, Mrs. Petty, the maids. What are her relationships with these women? Is she truly friends with any of them? Are any of the women mother figures for Charlotte?

7. Why does the author create her heroine as a red-head? Is there any significance to the color red in **A Private Hotel for Gentle Ladies**?

8. Describe the marriage between Charlotte and Hays. What societal and familial pressures influence it? Do you think it is basically a solid marriage? How does Charlotte's view of her marriage change by the end?

9. What is the importance of place in this novel? How does the architecture, streets, and energy of Boston play into the novel? Why are physical structures and interiors of both the Heath house and the Beechmont Hotel described in such detail? Does Charlotte feel comfortable in either place?

10. What is the importance of stories, plays, poetry, and paintings in A Private Hotel for Gentle Ladies? In what ways does this novel stress the importance of the imagination? Do you think Charlotte needs to control her imagination or let it run wild?

11. What do horses represent in this novel? Why does Charlotte love riding so much? What freedoms come from "riding like a man"?

12. Discuss the theme of betrayal in **A Private Hotel for Gentle Ladies**. What types of betrayal occur? Is lying a betrayal? Is silence? Is lying or silence ever a wise choice? What is the importance of forgiveness in this novel? What about Charlotte's wish to have a sense of equality with her husband?

13. Describe Charlotte's transformation from the beginning to the end of the novel. In what significant ways does she change? Who and what helps her along the way? Is the transformation more of a learning process or an awakening, or both?

14. How do you feel about Charlotte's decision not to try to connect with her parents when she discovers their identity? What forces come into play when she leaves her hometown without revealing herself to them? Is it a spontaneous, impulsive act, or does it emerge from her basic character and sense of herself and her life? Can you imagine it being played out differently?

15. Do you think this novel is a romantic comedy? In what ways does the author infuse the novel with humor? In what ways does this novel feel like a classic 19th century novel?

Author Bio

Ellen Cooney is the author of A PRIVATE HOTEL FOR GENTLE LADIES and other novels. Her stories have appeared in *The New Yorker* and many literary journals. She has taught writing at MIT, Harvard and Boston College, and now lives in Maine with her dogs Andy, Skip and Maxine --- who are each, in their own way, rescues.

Critical Praise

"Charlotte Heath is the most enticing heroine I've met in some time: tenderhearted yet obstinate, genteel yet deeply sensual. The adventure she takes us on is wonderfully eccentric, deliciously observed, and ends with the kind of gratifying surprise that reminds me why telling stories, and reading them, is such an essential pleasure in my life."

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