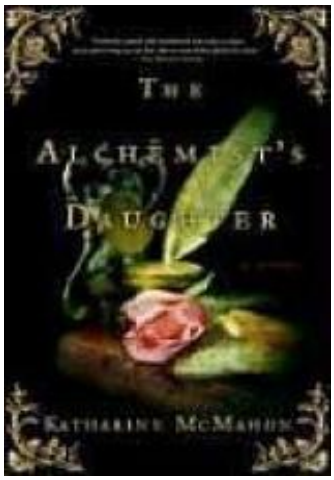
The Alchemist's Daughter

by Katharine McMahon



About the Book

There are long-held secrets at the manor house in Buckinghamshire, England, where Emilie Selden has been raised in near isolation by her father. A student of Isaac Newton, John Selden believes he can turn his daughter into a brilliant natural philosopher and alchemist. Secluded in their ancient house, with only two servants for company, he fills Emilie with knowledge and records her progress obsessively.

In the spring of 1725, father and daughter begin their most daring alchemical experiment to date --- they will attempt to breathe life into dead matter. But their work is interrupted by the arrival of two strangers: one a researcher, the other a dazzling young merchant. During the course of a sultry August, while her father is away, Emilie experiences the passion of first love. Listening to her heart rather than her head, she makes a choice.

Banished to London and plunged headlong into a society that is both glamorous and ruthless, Emilie discovers that for all her extraordinary education she has no insight into the workings of the human heart. When she tries to return to the world of books and study, she instead unravels a shocking secret that sets her on her true journey to enlightenment.

The Alchemist's Daughter is a gripping, evocative tale. Set against the backdrop of eighteenth-century London society, it is an unforgettable story of one woman's journey through a world of mystery, passion, and obsession.

> Selden Manor was the crucible in which my father, the Gills, and I lived together. I peer into it now with the respectful caution with which I was taught to approach any volatile experiment. I am searching for a day to illustrate our life before 1725, the year when everything changed. And unlike the blacksmith's daughter, I am an expert in observation. I know what I am looking for --- bubbles of gas, a rise in temperature, an alteration in texture --- small indications of chemical change that mean something significant is happening.

--- from **The Alchemist's Daughter**

Discussion Guide

1. How do you feel about the way the novel and its characters deal with the issue of slavery? How does the situation of each character color his or her opinion of the slave trade? How do those opinions help define their characters? How would you describe Emilie's opinion of the slave trade? Does her point of view change during the course of the book?

2. At the time of their meeting and then marriage, how do you think Aislabie truly feels about Emilie? Is he in love? Does he have other motivations for wanting to marry her? How and why do these feelings change during the course of the book?

3. Why are the Gills so loyal to Selden, despite evidence that they have disagreed with their master and were, at the end of his life, blamed for Emilie's fall from grace?

4. Would you describe Emilie as a sentimental person? Considering the purely intellectual education she has received at her father's hands, how do you make sense of the sentimental attachment she has toward her mother's possessions?

5. Despite her intelligence, Emilie tends to miss or ignore many signs that point to Aislabie's true nature: his involvement in the slave trade; flaunting expensive new ornaments while claiming poverty; undermining his wife's wishes about the remodeling of Selden; refusing to consider the concerns of Selden's tenants. Why do you think it takes infidelity on such a blatant scale for her to see him for what he is? Are there other signs she may have missed?

6. Do you think Emilie will be a better landlord than her father was? Why or why not?

7. Did Emilie fail her father's parenting "experiment," as she supposes when she reads his notebooks? What outcome do you think would have satisfied him? Were his hopes realistic? Were they fair?

8. After the discovery of her mother's true identity, Emilie begins to regard men's attentions to herself in a new way. What do you make of this change?

9. Do you think that Sarah and Emilie could ever have been friends? Is there any action Emilie could have taken early in her marriage to gain Sarah's affection? What do you think their relationship might have been like if Emilie had invited Sarah to stay at Selden with her child?

10. Discuss the laboratory explosion. What do you think Emilie expected to happen? What did she hope to accomplish?

11. What do you think Aurelie's childhood will be like?

12. How do the discovery of Sarah's pregnancy and the aftermath of that discovery affect the power dynamic in the Aislabies' marriage?

13. What sort of relationship do you envision between Emilie and Shales after the novel's end?

Author Bio

Katharine McMahon is the author of four novels published in the United Kingdom. She has taught in secondary schools, performed in local theater, and worked as a Royal Literary Fund fellow teaching writing skills at the Universities of Hertfordshire and Warwick. She lives in Hertfordshire, England.

Critical Praise

"An absolutely wonderful book. A beautifully written story, rich with detail."

The Alchemist's Daughter
by Katharine McMahon

Publication Date: October 24, 2006
Genres: Fiction, Historical Fiction
Paperback: 352 pages
Publisher: Three Rivers Press
ISBN-10: 0307335852
ISBN-13: 9780307335852