

Carnations in Lisbon: Book Club Guide

About the Book

Set across decades and continents, *Carnations in Lisbon* weaves together personal memory and political history. From the oppressive regime of the Portuguese Estado Novo to the quiet domestic spaces of modern Britain, the novel explores love, betrayal, legacy, and the aftershocks of dictatorship. Through the intersecting lives of Helen, Elena, Marco, and Joaquim, it unpacks the private costs of public silence and the courage required to tell the truth.

Discussion Questions

The Past in the Present

How do historical events — particularly the Carnation Revolution — continue to affect characters' lives decades later? What does the novel suggest about inherited trauma or silence?

Moral Ambiguity

Joaquim is one of the most complex characters in the book. Were your feelings toward him consistent throughout? Does he deserve redemption?

Secrets and Identity

Helen grows up with a false understanding of her origins. How does the eventual truth affect her relationships — with herself, her mother, and Marco?

The Role of Women

How are female characters like Elena, Laurinda, and Helen shaped by the systems they resist or accommodate? In what ways are they agents of change?

History and Fiction

How did the blend of real historical events and fictional characters impact your reading? Were there moments when the line between truth and invention became particularly meaningful?

Setting as Character

Lisbon, Oxford, Coimbra, and Medmenham all feature prominently. How does the novel use setting to reflect inner lives or historical shifts?

Love and Loyalty

What kinds of love are depicted in the novel — romantic, familial, patriotic? Are there moments when loyalty becomes harmful?

Legacy and Closure

By the end of the novel, do the main characters find closure? What has been gained or lost over the course of their journeys?

Symbols

How is the Jacaranda tree used as a symbol to evoke emotions and attitudes? What other symbols occur throughout the book?

Themes to Explore

Political repression and personal complicity

Feminist resistance and motherhood

Identity, truth, and self-invention

Love across borders (national, cultural, generational: brothers, fathers & sons, mothers & daughters)

Memory, myth, and the construction of history

Use of symbols, such as the jacaranda tree, Gomes's black gown, the carnations, the river, the house