

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Butchering Art
by Lindsey Fitzharris

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Lindsey Fitzharris is the author of *The Butchering Art: Joseph Lister's Quest to Transform the Grisly World of Victorian Medicine*, which won the PEN/E. O. Wilson Award for Literary Science Writing and has been translated into multiple languages. Her TV series *The Curious Life and Death of...* aired on the Smithsonian Channel. She contributes regularly to the *Wall Street Journal*, *Scientific American*, and other notable publications, and holds a doctorate in the History of Science and Medicine from the University of Oxford.

BOOK SUMMARY

In *The Butchering Art*, the historian Lindsey Fitzharris reveals the shocking world of nineteenth-century surgery and shows how it was transformed by advances made in germ theory and antiseptics between 1860 and 1875. She conjures up early operating theaters—no place for the squeamish—and surgeons, working before anesthesia, who were lauded for their speed and brute strength. These pioneers knew that the aftermath of surgery was often more dangerous than patients' afflictions, and they were baffled by the persistent infections that kept mortality rates stubbornly high. At a time when surgery couldn't have been more hazardous, an unlikely figure stepped forward: a young, melancholy Quaker surgeon named Joseph Lister, who would solve the riddle and change the course of history.

Fitzharris dramatically reconstructs Lister's career path to his audacious claim that germs were the source of all infection and could be countered by a sterilizing agent applied to wounds. She introduces us to Lister's contemporaries—some of them brilliant, some outright criminal—and leads us through the grimy schools and squalid hospitals where they learned their art, the dead houses where they studied, and the cemeteries they ransacked for cadavers.

Eerie and illuminating, *The Butchering Art* celebrates the triumph of a visionary surgeon whose quest to unite science and medicine delivered us into the modern world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Would you recommend this book to someone? Why or why not (or with what caveats)? What kind of reader would most enjoy this book?
2. Did you find the author's writing style easy to read or hard to read? Why? How long did it take you to get into the book?
3. Who was your favorite character? What character did you identify with the most? Were there any characters that you disliked? Why?
4. Did any part of this book strike a particular emotion in you? Which part and what emotion did the book make you feel?
5. How much did you know about this book before picking it up? What surprised you the most about the book?
6. Was there any part of the plot or aspects of the characters that frustrated or upset you? If so, why?

7. How thought-provoking did you find the book? Did the book change your opinion about anything, or did you learn something new from it? If so, what?
8. Did you highlight or bookmark any passages from the book? Did you have a favorite quote or quotes? If so, share which and why?
9. From your point of view, what were the central themes of the book? How well do you think the author did at exploring them?
10. Compare this book to other books you have read by the same author, or other books you have read covering the same or similar themes. How are they the same or different?
11. How would you adapt this book into a movie? Who would you cast in the leading roles?
12. Rate this book on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest. Why did you give the book the rating you did? Did any part of this book club discussion change your rating from what it would have been directly after finishing the book?

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