

## ~ Asylum Study Guide Themes & Questions ~

Asylum is set in 1899 and the mid-1970s when the rise and fall of manufacturing, changing mores and folkways, and struggles for equal rights, prompted discussion of social issues that remain relevant today.

We'd love to hear which subjects aroused discussion in your book club or circle of friends.

Please contact us with your ideas for our next Study Guide update.

### **Asylums, Retreats & Prisons**

In the mid to late 1800s, asylums often served as storage for unwanted women, children, and those who had become burdensome to family or society due to finances, behavior or whim. More socially acceptable than divorce, asylums were the prisons for non-compliant and disobedient wives who were declared insane by their husbands.

- Can you imagine your life under such control?
- Can you imagine being compliant?
- Discuss similarities between asylums of the past and today's prisons?
- Do the rich, poor, and middle of our society enjoy equal justice for all?

### **Safety & Security**

In 1899 when twelve-year-old Maggie unwittingly witnessed a shocking scandal, she ran. When she discovered a "wicked villainy" at the asylum, she had little choice but to record it. In our time, we are often urged if we "See Something. Say Something."

- If you witnessed wrongdoing, would you report it, ignore it, or run for your life?
- If your well-being was threatened, would you report it, ignore it, or run for your life?
- Have you been in a dangerous situation? Intentionally? Or inadvertently?
- What was your response and why?

## **RELATIONSHIPS**

### **Family & Genealogy**

Laura "Del" and her grandmother are as close as two people can be. They enjoy a psychic connection, even sharing the same dreams. Del and Marcia are closer than most sisters, yet they're not related.

- In your experience, is blood thicker than water?
- How important is lineage?
- How far back can you trace your lineage?
- How well do you know your ancestors' backgrounds? Are you curious?
- Are you sure you know the facts? Does it matter?
- Do you have a secret you've kept hidden from family, friends, or loved ones?
- Do you suspect a loved one's secret is being kept from you?
- Which secrets should be kept and which should not (adoptions, arrests, crimes, prison, education, health, wealth, religious beliefs, political ideology, sexual preference)?
- What, if anything, is best kept secret?
- Would you support a family member's wrong action even if you disagreed?
- Would you lie or cover up for a family member?
- Have you visited a genealogy website?

## **Friends, Best Friends & Lovers**

Though best friends, Del and Marcia don't share common interests, social standing, or financial status. Shared values, common history, reliability, and trust cement their bond, and individual strengths and weaknesses balance a non-competitive and durable friendship.

- Do you have lifelong best friend? More than one?
- How would you describe your best friendship: competitive or balanced?
- What qualities (honesty, trust, loyalty, dependability, etc.) do you value in a "best" friendship?
- What matters most, duration of friendship or qualities?
- Is it easier or more difficult to constructively criticize your best friend or a casual acquaintance?
- Can you call your best friend 24/7? Are they your first emergency call?
- When you have good news to share, are they your first call?
- Does your best friend approve of your life partner/husband/lover?
- Would you date your best friend's ex (lover, husband, partner)?
- Would you borrow money from, or lend to, your best friend?
- Do you keep secrets from your best friend?
- Is your best friend female or male?
- Can you, or have you, maintained a platonic relationship with the opposite sex?

Making friends in the asylum proves difficult and risky for Maggie. When she tries to befriend inmate Kathleen, her innocent gesture triggers bedlam, putting herself and the kitchen ladies in danger, and matron in trouble.

- Have you been betrayed by a well-intentioned close friend?
- Did your good intentions ever backfire and cause hurt to your friend or lover?

## **Loss & Grief**

Maggie, Antonio, and Del react differently to the tragic loss of loved ones. Laura must navigate new responsibilities, shifting relationships, and settling in her High Hill home. Procrastination leads to feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and self-doubt, all of which interfere with progress.

- Have you lost someone close?
- Has time eased your grief?
- What most helped to ease your grief?
- Can you relate to Del's procrastination to return to work? To sort through Gram's personal belongings?
- Have you had to sort, sell, donate a loved one's belongings?
- Which items stirred sharp memories?
- Which items did you keep?

## **Inheritance & Succession**

When Attorney Aaron Schaeffer read Rosa's Last Will and Testament to Delito family members, Laura reacted, "My throat tightened and there was hardly a place for me to look without feeling self-conscious. ... No one was more stunned than I..."

- Have you discussed last wishes with your family? What was easier or more difficult than expected?

- How did you initiate discussion of last wishes? What, if anything, most surprised you about the process?
- Do you have a Last Will and Testament?
- What emotions surprised you while drafting your Last Will and Testament?
- Did your inheritance cause ill will from family members?

### **Family Business Issues**

Laura Delito “was perfectly happy living in Chicago and working at the museum” where her career “was poised to soar, then Gram called” demanding her return. Gram told Laura she had “had enough time to find herself,” and if she didn’t find herself back home, Gram would sell the business. Done deal. She was back within the week.

- Have family pressures nudged you into a not-your-first-choice career?
- Would you sacrifice a successful independent career to join a family business?
- What would motivate you to sacrifice an independent career to join the family business?
- What would be the most challenging aspect of working with family members?

## **SOCIETY & COMMUNITY LIFE**

### **From Town Greens & Parishes to Shopping Malls & Social Media**

*Asylum*’s description begins “On an innocent day.” The author sets a day like any other when what you believe is true, before that moment when your reality shatters.

- What does “an innocent day” mean to you?
- Has society lost its innocence? If yes, what has contributed to its loss?
- Do you recall an incident that shocked a naive perception of truth?
- Have you experienced that awful moment when everything you believed to be true, was proven wrong?

In his desperate search for his daughter Maggie, Antonio Delito queries parish priests who would be aware of the comings and goings in their community.

- What is today’s version of “one who knows”?
- How do you learn what’s happening in your community? In your neighborhood? In your family or household?
- Has society relinquished too much privacy? Has it become expected?
- Have you relinquished too much privacy?

Late one night when Del drives through her downtown-in-transition, she thinks, *Seeing boarded windows of failed businesses was like peeking into Delito’s future*. She feels the weight of her responsibility to lead the family business to a successful and profitable future.

- What memories do you recall of “downtown” life?
- Do malls fill the same, or a changed gathering place need?
- Do you prefer shopping small business, mom-and-pop, mall and big-box stores, or online? Why? Advantages and disadvantages of each?

## **WHAT'S TRENDING**

### **Fashion Trends & Fads**

Even while Del boldly plans a radical new product line for Delito, Inc., her personal style remained conservative. She wore "... neat classic clothes. Straight skirts just above the knee, not minis. Stovepipe slacks, not hip-huggers nor bell-bottoms. Herringbone and tweed jackets, not satin nor velvet and definitely not polyester."

- Does your personal style accurately reflect who you are?
- Which fashion trends, products or services from the past would you like to see return?
- Which deserve an unmarked grave?

### **Communication & Technology**

Without cell phones, a 24-hour period of "telephone tag" between Laura and Michael, forcing time for ideas to incubate, resulting in more effective communication.

- Have modern devices make life easier or more stressful?
- Do modern devices help or hinder meaningful communication?
- How do you prefer to communicate? With family? Friends? Lovers?
- How do you communicate with co-workers?
- Do you set limits on work-related texts or other forms of communication?
- Does your company set limits on business-related communication during off-hours?
- Are you addicted to your devices?

### **The Art & Necessity of Letter Writing**

In 1900, Antonio's life changes when an urgent letter arrives by courier. In 1974, a stack of mail on Laura's desk includes "A red and blue striped airmail letter ... The postmark reads Morocco. ..." She places the foreign letter at the bottom of the stack, "... anticipating its contents, saving it for dessert." She prepares a glass of Arab-style tea, creates a ritual around reading the letter.

- Do you value receiving handwritten letters?
- Do you write letters? How often?
- After decades of decline, more states support teaching cursive in schools. Do you agree?
- Has the art of letter writing gone the way of proper etiquette and formal social standards?

## **WORKPLACE CULTURE & WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

### **Women in the Workplace**

Happy to be living far from family scrutiny, Laura reluctantly returned to the family jewelry business. Male executives preferred the status quo and resisted her standing.

- Have you had to work harder than male coworkers to advance in pay and position?
- Are all positions in the company open to you?
- Are you encouraged to rise to higher positions?
- Do you feel less appreciated and rewarded than male coworkers?
- Are you paid less than male coworkers doing the same job? Do you know?
- When learning of another's failure, did you learn from it? Did your actions change? Did you doubt yourself?
- Does being female in the workplace offer any advantage?
- Do you prefer working for a male or female supervisor? Discuss the differences.

- Do you think men prefer working for a male or female supervisor? Why?

### **Workplace Troubles & Harassment**

Del was offended by a pinup calendar hanging in the factory assembly room. She said, “It’s crude and vulgar and it disrespects me.” At first opportunity, she tore it down.

- What did you think of Del’s strong reaction to the girlie calendar?
- Have you been offended by sexual displays or jokes in the workplace? Other place?
- Have you been sexually harassed or witnessed harassment in the workplace? How did it make you feel?
- Are you familiar with reporting procedures in your workplace?
- Does your company have harassment procedures in place?
- Are you familiar with reporting procedures in your workplace?
- How can a company discourage and prevent a culture of harassment?
- Are you surprised that sexual harassment remains a serious problem in the workplace, schools, sports teams, colleges, religious institutions, and even the military?

### **Child labor in U.S. history**

As workers moved from farms to city factories, industry preferred child labor. Children were more manageable, cheaper, and less likely to strike—appealing qualities for captains of business. By 1900, child labor standards depended on each state’s specific law its enforcement. Children worked in large numbers in mines and factories; textiles, agriculture, and canneries; and as newsboys, messengers, and peddlers. Minimum age of employment and limits to the number of hours a child may work were not regulated by federal law until the Fair Labor Standards Act, signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1938.

Global numbers os the International Labour Organization (ILO), a specialized agency of the United Nations, “Child labour has declined by one third since 2000, from 246 million to 168 million children. More than half, 85 million, are in hazardous work (down from 171 million in 2000).” The world strives to eliminate child labour by 2025. Resources at ILO.org

### **Human Trafficking**

The fastest growing crime in America according to the FBI is Identity/Cyber Theft, followed by Human Trafficking, a form of modern-day slavery. This crime occurs when a trafficker uses force, fraud or coercion to control another person for the purpose of engaging in commercial sex acts or soliciting labor or services against his/her will.

To learn more about statistics, resources, or how you can help, refer to the National Human Trafficking Resource Center at: [HumanTraffickingHotline.org](http://HumanTraffickingHotline.org) or [HumanRightsFirst.org](http://HumanRightsFirst.org)

- Human trafficking remains in today’s headlines. What can we do about it?
- Where, today, do women and children remain indentured? Discuss.
- Compare indentured servitude to slavery

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### **Did we miss an important topic?**

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