

The Thirteenth Tale

by Diane Setterfield

About the Book

Margaret Lea works in her father's antiquarian bookshop where her fascination for the biographies of the long-dead has led her to write them herself. She gets a letter from one of the most famous authors of the day, the mysterious Vida Winter, whose popularity as a writer has been in no way diminished by her reclusiveness. Until now, Vida has toyed with journalists who interview her, creating outlandish life histories for herself — all of them invention. Now she is old and ailing, and at last she wants to tell the truth about her extraordinary life. Her letter to Margaret is a summons.

Somewhat anxiously, the equally reclusive Margaret travels to Yorkshire to meet her subject. Vida's strange, gothic tale features the Angelfield family; dark-hearted Charlie and his unbrotherly obsession with his sister, the fascinating, devious, and willful Isabelle, and Isabelle's daughters, the feral twins Adeline and Emmeline. Margaret is captivated by the power of Vida's storytelling, but she doesn't entirely trust Vida's account. She goes to check up on the family, visiting their old home and piecing together their story in her own way. What she discovers on her journey to the truth is for Margaret a chilling and transforming experience.

Praise for the Book

"Eerie and fascinating.

— *USA Today*

"Pitch-perfect. . . . A first-rate mystery . . . [that] lovingly invokes both *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca*."

— *Entertainment Weekly*

"Readers will feel the magnetic pull of this paean to words, books, and the magical power of story."

— *People*

"A wholly original work told in the vein of all the best gothic classics. Lovers of books about book lovers will be enthralled."

— *Booklist*

"A spellbinding story that grabs the reader from the opening page."

— *Toronto Sun*

Courtesy of Washington Square Press

About the Author

Diane Setterfield

British Novelist (1964?–)

Updated: 10/18/2007

Personal Information: Born c. 1964, in Reading, England; married Peter Whittall (an accountant).

Education: Attended Bristol University.

Addresses: Home: Harrogate, Yorkshire, England.

Career: Writer. Worked variously as an English teacher in France, a French professor, and as a private French teacher for people moving to France.

Awards: Quill Award, debut author of the year, 2007, for *The Thirteenth Tale*.

WRITINGS

- *The Thirteenth Tale* (novel), Atria Books (New York, NY), 2006.

Sidelights

Diane Setterfield's best-selling literary mystery novel, *The Thirteenth Tale*, transformed her from a teacher into a professional writer. The book tells the story of Vida Winter, a famous author best known for her volume of thirteen stories, of which the last is missing. Winter hires Margaret Lea, a biographer and bookseller, to write about her life, but nothing about the situation is as straightforward as it might seem, and the result is a gothic tale of adultery, arson, and identity swapping. Setterfield admits that the most difficult thing about devoting her time to writing the book was the precariousness of a writer's life. She told *Publishers Weekly* contributor Dick Donahue: "There were no guarantees that my writing would be any good, that I would be able to finish the novel satisfactorily, or that anyone would want to read it." Setterfield's gamble to try her hand at writing paid off. Her novel sold in a ten-day auction, earning large advances for both the British and American rights. Rights to the novel were sold in more than thirty countries. The book also landed on the top of American best-seller lists the first week after it was published. Regarding her sudden popularity, Setterfield told *BookBrowse.com*: "I'm used to living a really quiet life with lots of space to think. I'm not used to being so busy and social and meeting all these people. It's not that I'm anti-social, just that I like my own company, and I've been living with people who aren't real for the past few years — I find real people a lot more demanding."

The Thirteenth Tale has garnered strong critical praise as well as commercial success. Kaite Mediatore Stover, in a review for *Booklist*, called the book "a wholly original work told in the vein of all the best gothic classics." A contributor to *Kirkus Reviews* noted that "this is no postmodern revision of the genre. It is a contemporary gothic tale whose excesses and occasional implausibility . . . can be forgiven for the thrill of the storytelling." In a review for *Entertainment Weekly*, Tina Jordan remarked: "Setterfield's spooky, gloom-infused work lovingly invokes both *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* . . . , but the

mystery is very much her own.” Frank Wilson, in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, concluded that “those who buy and read this complex, compelling and, in the end, deeply moving novel are unlikely to feel they’ve been shortchanged.” *Library Journal* contributor Jenne Bergstrom dubbed the novel “equally suited to a rainy afternoon on the couch or a summer day on the beach.”

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PERIODICALS

- *Booklist*, May 15, 2006, author biography, p. S10; September 1, 2006, Kaite Mediatore Stover, review of *The Thirteenth Tale*, p. 58.
- *Bulletin with Newsweek*, November 14, 2006, Anne Susskind, review of *The Thirteenth Tale*, p. 77.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, September 15, 2006, Tina Jordan, “Winter’s Tale” review of *The Thirteenth Tale*, p. 80.
- *Globe and Mail* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), September 30, 2006, Michelle Orange, review of *The Thirteenth Tale*, p. D8.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, July 15, 2006, review of *The Thirteenth Tale*, p. 697.
- *Library Journal*, August 1, 2006, Jenne Bergstrom, review of *The Thirteenth Tale*, p. 73.
- *People*, October 2, 2006, Sue Corbett, review of *The Thirteenth Tale*, p. 61.
- *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 4, 2006, Frank Wilson, review of *The Thirteenth Tale*.
- *Publishers Weekly*, June 26, 2006, review of *The Thirteenth Tale*, p. 27; August 14, 2006, Dick Donahue, author biography, p. 89.
- *Spectator*, September 30, 2006, Miranda France, review of *The Thirteenth Tale*.

ONLINE

- *BookBrowse.com*, <http://www.bookbrowse.com/> (October, 12, 2006), author biography and interview.
- *Independent Online*, <http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/> (September 25, 2006), Louise Jury, “British Teacher Becomes a Literary Sensation in the US.”
- *Internet Writing Journal*, <http://www.internetwritingjournal.com/> (September 25, 2006), author biography and interview.
- *Scrinanbbles Blog*, <http://scrinanbbles.blogspot.com/> (October 16, 2006), Nancy Fontaine, review of *The Thirteenth Tale*.

Source: *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2007

Source Database: Contemporary Authors Online

A Special Note from author, Diane Setterfield:

Dear Readers,

Once, in a classroom in Preston, Lancashire, teaching a class of first year French students, I happened to open a sentence with the words, “When you are in the pub or in the common room, talking to your friends about books...” Instantly the words were out of my mouth, my attention was drawn to a girl in the second row. Her face was twisted into an expression that managed to combine utter bewilderment and the beginnings of repugnance. “Talking about *books?*” she repeated.

“Yes. Don’t you talk about books when you are with your friends?”

Her lips twisted. “No!” And in that single word she managed to convey to me an entire attitude: books are for nerds, talking about books is for nerds, studying a mandatory literature module might be unavoidable, but reading for pleasure and admitting it? Talking about books for fun? No way! That’s for weirdos!

What is it that makes reading weird? I think it has something to do with the solitary nature of the practice. It’s an activity that people frequently retreat to do. They read in bed, when they are alone, in quiet places. And even when people read in the company of others (I’m thinking of the mother reading on the sofa while her children watch TV, the boy reading on the park bench oblivious to the sound of a distant football game, the girl on the bus blind to her fellow passengers because she is lost in a book) the act of reading somehow sets them apart, isolates them. They’re no longer part of the group. It’s an anti-social habit.

Of course from the inside of the experience, it’s not solitary at all. It’s an intimate meeting with another person, one whose words only you can hear, and who is speaking only to you. Reading is to become so involved with a group of fictional beings that sometimes they stay your friends your whole life long. Imagine it’s Dickens that girl on the bus is reading. Imagine it’s *Hard Times*. What exactly is going on between her head and those pages? A man who has been dead for over a hundred years is talking to her and about to make her cry over people who don’t exist and never have. Weird? You bet. Gloriously, magically, fabulously weird.

In my novel *The Thirteenth Tale*, Margaret the heroine is one of the weird ones. She is a withdrawn and solitary young woman, burdened by the secrets of her past and taking refuge in reading. But if it is reading that makes it possible for her to withdraw into herself as she does, it is also reading that brings her back out: a mysterious letter from Vida Winter, England’s most famous living writer, leads her to a book, *Thirteen Tales of Change and Desperation*. Despite its title this book contains only twelve stories. When Margaret accepts the invitation to write the biography of the book’s author, she takes on at the same time the mystery of the missing thirteenth tale. From then on everywhere she goes she meets other readers. Reticent housekeepers, a dark-eyed doctor, a country solicitor, all approach Margaret with the fevered eyes of the devoted reader. ‘What about

the thirteenth tale?’ they want to know. Little by little Margaret learns the truth about Miss Winter, about the thirteenth tale, about herself. And through her contact with others she learns that life is for living, not just for reading, and that the pleasures of reading are pleasures that are no less satisfying for being shared. What she grows to understand is that reading, though it may be a solitary, even anti-social activity, leads naturally back to real life, real community, when we share the joy it brings.

The friendship of my book group kept me going during the long years of writing this book. When progress was hard, they would joke, “One day we’ll be reading your book for book group.”

I talk about books every time I get the chance. My book group has five members (we all knew each other before) and no rules. We meet almost every Thursday, discuss a set book every five weeks or so, and the rest of the time we talk about anything and everything; from how to find a good electrician to corruption in politics, from the kind of bag suitable for a funeral to our recent appraisals at work. Husbands, shopping, the Middle East, the price of pot plants, aging parents... Nothing is too trivial or too grave for book group. And in between all these things we talk about books. Our conversation is punctuated by cries of “I remember reading something about that...” and “Have you read...?” and “I think you’d love...” A dozen times our chat veers towards books and then away again, in a seamless stream of life/book talk. This is one reason why book talk is not just for nerds. Book talk is life talk. It’s for *people*.

I wonder what became of that girl who thought talking about books was for nerds. I kept a close but secret eye on her during the rest of the course. I rarely put her on the spot in front of the class, and if I did ask her a question, it was usually a ‘safe’ one, relating more to the French language used than to the themes or ideas of the book. In a way I was giving her an easy ride. But in reality I was allowing her to sit in peace on the edge of the class discussion, in the hope that despite herself she would find the talk irresistible and one day join in of her own accord. We book lovers can get evangelical about favorite books and reading in general, but there is no way we can *make* others share our passion. You can’t force love. In the end, for my student, it was Apollinaire who did it. We were reading *Le Pont Mirabeau*, a poem about lost love and the passage of time, and for a few minutes some of the class ‘nerds’ had been circling in conversation a central element of the poem without quite nailing it down. I was about to step in and give them some further guidance when my student spoke. “So what you’re saying is, that he, the poet, is the bridge, right? And the river, running under it, is his life, going by?”

The nerds considered. “Yes,” they said. “That’s it.”

And it was.

She passed the module (just), and after that she never took another literature module again.

I wonder whether she ever remembers *Le Pont Mirabeau*. I wonder whether she still thinks that talking about books is for nerds. I wonder what she would make of the explosion in the number of book groups in the years since that encounter in the classroom.

I wonder (fingers crossed) whether she has joined one?

— Diane

Courtesy of Washington Square Press

Author Interview

Q: The scandalous secrets of the Angelfield family are a worthy addition to the most lauded of gothic novels. Where did you get the idea for this dark, sordid family history?

Diane Setterfield: Quite honestly, I don't know. This book took three years to write and its real genesis was longer still: there was no single moment when I thought: *Aha! What a great idea!* Rather there was a slow and gradual accumulation of numerous small ideas.

Miss Winter's voice was the first element of the book to come to me, and that came from thinking about Patricia Highsmith's Ripley character. I had been considering what it must be like to know oneself to be one kind of person, whilst consistently giving in public the impression of being an entirely different kind of person. I was moved by the loneliness such a person might feel, and in one of those exhilarating rushes of inspiration (I wish there were more of them) dashed down a piece that later became Miss Winter's letter to Margaret. At that stage I didn't even know if it was the voice of a man or a woman.

Later I had a dream in which I was approaching the window of a large, dark house. The window was illuminated by a curious, living light. Realizing it was fire, I hurried forwards and saw two figures struggling in the flames . . . An ordinary enough dream, but one that haunted me with unusual persistence. It became the fire in *The Thirteenth Tale*.

Once I had a voice and an event, I started to write scenes in a rather tentative, experimental fashion. Little by little I worked out what the story was by following my characters.

The fact that the story should be about twins was in my mind very firmly from the early days, but I have no idea why. Just for the record, I am not a twin.

Themes of isolation, identity, and abandonment emerged gradually.

The main secret of the mystery (I won't spell it out here, in case anyone is reading who hasn't finished the book yet) came to me when I was walking home from the supermarket. I have to admit, it took me by surprise and I was inclined initially to disregard it — *Surely not?* I remember thinking — but it imposed itself in a determined fashion.

Q: You were an academic before becoming an author. What prompted the change in careers?

DS: British universities are not very happy places for their staff currently, and I gave up academic life for the same reasons as many others do and would like to do. In particular the erosion of my private reading time made me unhappy — if I cannot escape for an hour or two every day by reading for pleasure, then small problems seem to grow large, and I begin to feel enormously burdened. After five years in the profession I was plagued by the feeling that by some absurd mistake I was leading someone else’s life, and was desperate to find a path back to my own. I had always wanted to be a writer, but was impeded by the belief that to be a writer one had to be extraordinary, and I knew I wasn’t. By the time I was ready to give up my academic career I had realized that whilst *books* are extraordinary, writers themselves are no more or less special than anyone else.

Q: You specialize in 19th century French literature, particularly the works of Andre Gide. How does this background affect your writing? Are there any similarities between Gide and yourself?

DS: I am sure my writing has been influenced by my study of French in a great many ways, and not only by the literature. There can be nothing to match the practice of translation for deepening one’s understanding of one’s own language. And I suspect an expert might be able to see, beneath my English prose style, the occasional shadow of a French structure. (Quite often if I am not sure how to phrase something, I try it in my mind in French, then come back to English; juggling like this often throws up the expression I am looking for.)

As for the literature, how could it not touch my writing? For reading is without doubt the single most important factor affecting my work. When I was writing my Ph.D. (which I did very slowly over a period of seven years or so) I read and reread half a dozen works by Gide over and over again. This kind of reading — intense, obsessive, constant — lays down rhythms in your mind that cannot easily be eradicated, and frequently when writing I am struck by phrases that to me have a distinctly Gidean cadence. For instance there is a section towards the end of *The Thirteenth Tale* that sounds to my ear just like a translation of Gide. It is the part that goes:

“As I stood up, I heard a sound. It was Aurelius, arriving at the lych gate. Snow had settled on his shoulders and he was carrying flowers.

‘Aurelius!’ How could he have grown so thin? So pale? ‘You’ve changed,’ I said.

‘I have worn myself out on a wild goose chase.’”

At the time I wrote it and every time I have read it since, it seems to have echoes of a curious little book by Gide called *Le Prométhée mal enchainé* (*Prometheus Misbound*). And yet when for the purposes of answering this question I skimmed through it, I

couldn't find a distinct textual twin. (I did find lots of references I'd forgotten to people in search of their stories). So why does my mind persist in hearing the echo? The explanation that most appeals to me is that there are hidden underground networks by which books pass secret messages to each other, networks that we readers and writers can only be half conscious of.

Any similarities between Gide and myself? I hope not. I don't think I'd have liked him much in real life. He was cruel to his wife, and in a fit of rage she set fire to the letters he had written to her. I don't blame her. And yet we have numerous preoccupations in common. This is entirely natural: I chose Gide for my Ph.D. because his books were about things I was already interested in. Questions of identity. The family — though he expressed his fascination differently: “Familles, je vous haïs!” he wrote, famously (Families, I hate you!). The importance of storytelling. I've also borrowed one of his favorite devices: the use of a writer as a main character. My use of Miss Winter's thirteenth tale as my title and a recurring motif in the book also owes a lot to Gide. Finally, Gide often spoke about a phenomenon he called “dédoublement.” By this he meant the splitting of the self into two: a self who acts, speaks, goes about in the world and has experiences, and a self who observes all this going on. When I first read about this I remember feeling that tingle you get when you recognize something of yourself in a piece of writing. But I imagine it's fairly common to sense oneself divided in this fashion.

Q: Several 19th century novels are mentioned throughout the story, *Jane Eyre* in particular. What inspiration did you draw from these novels, and do they play any significant role in your life?

DS: I was a child when I first read *Jane Eyre*. The book enthralled me, up to the death of Jane's friend Helen Burns. How I cried. But then, like Aurelius, I couldn't quite see the point of the rest of the book. I was too young, evidently. All my adult re-readings of the novel (which are not so numerous as Margaret's) have never quite erased the impression of that first reading. “My” Jane is still that unwanted child who finds friendship only to lose it again.

(WARNING: this next paragraph should be read only by people who have finished reading *The Thirteenth Tale*)

I had no grand plan in introducing *Jane Eyre* and other titles into *The Thirteenth Tale*. It seems curious to me now how they crept in. For creep they did, in silence and behind my back. It is impossible to reconstitute the processes of writing after the event, but to the best of my recollection it went something like this: *Jane Eyre* was the first actual book title to be mentioned. It came at a very early stage when I was writing odd scenes as they occurred to me, in a rather experimental fashion, as a way of figuring out what I could do with my characters. At this point the mystery of the girl in the mist was still a long way in the future. I wrote a piece about a girl climbing the bookshelves in the library at Angelfield House: she ends up slipping, bringing the curtains down with her and

dislodging a book as she falls. The book was *Jane Eyre*. This passage never made it into *The Thirteenth Tale*, but *Jane Eyre*, having once got in, never left. Only much later, when the girl in the mist element came to be, did I realize the connection between Miss Winter's story and Jane's: the outsider in the family. So it's one of those instances where the writing was ahead of the writer in knowing what it was doing, and it illustrates the extent to which writing is more about discovery than invention.

The other titles — well, as you might expect, they are favorites of mine. My sister discovered Wilkie Collins first, later we read him together. *Lady Audley's Secret* was my find, which I then shared with her. Like Doctor Clifton I love Sherlock Holmes. I gave Hester a blind spot about Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. *The Castle of Otranto* is one I haven't yet read — I'm saving it.

I said there was no grand plan, and there wasn't, but once the titles started coming, I made no effort to keep them out. They are there because they are part of the inner furniture of Margaret's and Miss Winter's minds, and because I love them.

Q: There are several sets of siblings in this novel, all examples of different kinds of relationships: Isabelle and Charlie; Margaret and her sister; Adeline and Emmeline; Tom and Emma. Do you have any siblings? If so, did your relationship with them inspire any of your characters' actions?

DS: I'm the eldest of three girls. My mother is from a large family, so I have dozens of cousins, too. But I would hate anyone to assume that the dysfunctional relationships between (most of) the siblings in the book were in any way based on my own experience of sisterhood! (On the other hand, having read the book, my sister did feel compelled to apologies for hitting me over the head with a recorder when she was six and I was eight.)

Q: Margaret says on page 4 that reading can be dangerous. In what ways do you think this is true, besides falling off of stonewalls while wrapped in a story?

DS: *Madame Bovary* is the classic literary case study of the dangers of reading. Where Madame B tries to live life as though it were a certain kind of book, Margaret, as we see her at the beginning, is in the process of retreating from life altogether into a world where her only friends are the dead writers of the books she reads. The solace she derives from books is absolutely real. But is it dangerous?

I crave an existence where I live in a library/kitchen with an endless supply of food and books, and nothing to do but read and eat. I never seem to have enough time to read, and to be honest, I don't know how much reading I would need to feel properly satisfied. Twice as much as I have now? Three times as much? And how much before it gets dangerous? One of my reading group friends in Yorkshire is a doctor who works with homeless people; she spends a lot of her work time dealing with drug and alcohol addiction problems. When we were reading James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* we

found ourselves taking a detour into a conversation about whether reading could be considered an addiction. It is, after all, mind-altering. (I'd be interested to know just what happens inside the brain, chemically and structurally, when someone reads. It might shed light on the reading addiction question.) I know there are people who don't read fiction at all, and I find it hard to understand how they can bear to be inside the same head all the time (Aurelius isn't a big reader, is he? Apart from the recipe books). I find it so soothing to have another mind I can just hop into by opening a book. In fact if I have to get a train and I don't have enough reading with me, I can feel quite panicky. So am I addicted? And is it dangerous?

When I was doing my Ph.D. I used to work in a library part time to pay my fees. It was in a run down part of town. There was one woman I have never forgotten. She used to come in every day and select three or four of those short formulaic romances. The next day she would return them, having read them, and take three or four more. She was frequently bruised; her children looked wan and dirty and unhappy. I used to worry about them. I used to wonder what she made of the idealized relationships in the books she was reading, and the contrast with what I imagined her own home life to be. Was the reading an escape for her? Wouldn't it have been better for her to stop reading and escape in reality? Was the reading in itself a danger? Not so dangerous as the man who beat her, surely.

Margaret's retreat from the world would leave her feeling unbearably isolated if she did not have the indirect human contact that comes through reading. But if it is reading that makes it possible for her to withdraw into herself as she does, it is also reading that brings her back out: *Thirteen Tales of Change and Desperation* takes her first to Miss Winter, then to Aurelius, gradually she comes to feel able to have a more open relationship with her father and as we leave her she is contemplating changes of an even greater kind. Is reading dangerous? I don't know. But I know one thing that is always dangerous, and that is not living. So I resist the lure of the kitchen/library. For now, at least.

Q: One of the first things Miss Winter tells Margaret is that all children mythologize their births. Do you have any interesting stories to share about your own early years?

DS: It took a long time for me to be born. It was summer, it was in the country, and the doctor and the midwife spent a lot of time in the garden: they were enchanted by the deer that came up to the fence for scraps. Meanwhile my Mum and I got on with things as best we could.

Q: Your love of literature, and books in general, is palpable in the pages of your novel. Tell us a little about your relationship with books. Did you have a library growing up? Did you ever work in a bookstore like the one Margaret and her father operate?

DS: I could write a whole book about my relationship with books! I suppose in a way I already have. You know my home town is called Reading? (It's pronounced Redding). My husband says if I ever wrote an autobiography I should call it *A Reading Girl*, for the play on words.

Looking over my answers to the other questions here (I am writing this answer last) it seems that my relationship to books is already indicated, explicitly or implicitly in many of them. So I hope it will be OK if I just add a few more fragments here.

- a. I came to reading early. It disappoints me that I can't remember learning to read. I wish I knew what it was like not to be able to do it.
- b. I was a timid child and very nervous. Like many children I found the world confusing and complicated, and from a very early age books appeared to me as a way of making sense of life. This is still what reading is, at heart, for me. There is a novel by Georges Perec called *La Vie, Mode d'Emploi (Life, A User's Manual)*. Not only is it a marvelous novel, but it seems to me that its title is the invisible subtitle of every novel there has ever been.
- c. I have never worked in an antiquarian or second-hand bookshop, though I did once work in a library for a year, and in an ordinary bookshop for two weeks. However bookshops — of all kinds — are among my favorite places.
- d. I was a first-born, so I came into a home where there was no children's library ready and waiting. All the books I read came one by one into the house, at birthdays, Christmases, as treats after visits to the dentist. And there were never enough! I was always thirsting for more. Later there was the community library and the school library. Oddly even this didn't feel like enough. Later when I was working I could have bought all the books I wanted, but I didn't have the time to read . . . So always this feeling of needing MORE. (See question 6 and the addiction issue.)

Q: On page 295 you describe Margaret as having a dream in which “everyone had someone else’s face.” You also write repeatedly about people having “stories.” Do you believe that we all have stories? And, on some level, do you think the stories are all the same, but with different faces?

DS: Does everyone have a story? Yes, yes, a thousand times yes. But it’s not always the one we think we have.

Are the stories all the same? No.

There are all sorts of theories about how many basic stories there are, ranging from two (quest and siege) upwards. Someone said seven, I think. And someone else thought 19 (or was it 14?) Of course you can categorize stories like this if you choose; sometimes it’s very useful to be able to do so. But in the real world of fiction the number of stories is infinite. I can’t step outside my door, or turn on the radio, or pick up a newspaper without coming across new stories. This is because of human uniqueness. No matter how many people exist, there will never be two the same (even twins aren’t the same), and this is so astonishing it stops me in my tracks every time I think about it. This is what makes the probably finite number of story types proliferate infinitely. In one sense, there is nothing new in *The Thirteenth Tale*. I take for granted that there is no plot or thematic element in it that couldn’t be traced to another book already written. Yet at the same time it is an entirely new story, because it is Margaret’s, and Aurelius’s and Miss Winter’s. This is more than just the same story with a different face. A different face implies a different vision, a different set of responses, different fears, different dreams, different desires. If you were to take a single set of events, and present them using two different sets of characters you wouldn’t end up with the same story with two different faces. You would have two stories. I’m stating it in an unnecessarily complicated fashion perhaps. The short version is this: story is character. Characters are infinite. Therefore stories are infinite.

Q: Aurelius wants to know the truth about his past, but Margaret tells him sometimes it’s better not to know. Do you think it’s best to always know the truth?

DS: A tricky one, this. I remember at school studying Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*. The girls feel intense nostalgia for their days in Moscow and dream endlessly about the day they will return. Through the course of the play it becomes clear they will never return. Yet they persist in the illusion. I remember long and passionate debates with our Russian teacher about the truth and whether or not it was better to know it. My classmates and I were all in favor of the truth, but what else would you expect? We were sixteen. Our teacher was older and wiser and very good at making us think. I am closer to his age now and less certain about the value of knowing the truth than I was. It all depends which truth we’re talking about . . . And who is going to do the knowing (or not).

Certainly for myself I believe I would wish always to know the truth, but then I also wish never to have to face a truth I cannot bear. Being able to look the truth in the face might be brave, or it might just mean you have been lucky with the truth you were dealt.

Of course in the case of Margaret's parents and Miss Winter, the truths they hide do not belong only to them. There is one set of ethical considerations attached to the question of whether or not one might choose to know the truth; when it comes to *telling* the truth, it is an entirely different set.

Q: Miss Winter tells Margaret that readers are fools for believing that writing is autobiographical. Well, it is — but not in the way they think. Even in this strange and mysterious tale, there must be something of you. What, if anything, is autobiographical about this novel?

DS: Most obviously my passion for books and reading. The passages about reading are generally fairly direct representations of my own experience. I am with Margaret's father in being a lover of contemporary literature as well as the nineteenth-century novels that she so adores. I found that the passages about reading came very easily, and in comparison with the rest of the text they needed little revising. When I was struggling with writing the book, it was to these passages that I would turn for reassurance. "Yes," I would think, "I'm on the right track." So in terms of actually producing the book, this autobiographical aspect was central.

In every other respect I think autobiographical factors have had only the slightest and most indirect part in the making of the book. Margaret was the last character to fall into place, and I remember at one point thinking that if I made her a self-portrait it might be easier to write her. But I felt this was the cheat's way out, and that the book would be the weaker because of it. So I persisted, and little by little she revealed herself. I'm glad I waited.

My husband did point out that the name Adeline contains all the letters of Diane. Is this a coincidence? And if not, what does it mean? I don't know.

Courtesy of Washington Square Press

Discussion Questions

1. Much of the novel takes place in two grand estates — Angelfield and then Miss Winter's. How are the houses reflections of their inhabitants?
2. As the story unfolds, we learn that Margaret and Miss Winter are both twins. What else do they have in common?
3. Margaret and her mother are bound by a singular loss — the death of Margaret's twin sister. How has each woman dealt with this loss, and how has it affected her life? If her parents had told her the truth about her twin, would Margaret still be haunted?
4. Books play a major role in this novel. Margaret, for example, sells books for a living. Miss Winter writes them. Most of the important action of the story takes place in libraries. There are stories within stories, all inextricably intertwined. Discuss the various roles of books, stories, and writing in this novel.
5. Miss Winter asks Margaret if she'd like to hear a ghost story — in fact, there seem to be several ghost stories weaving their way through. In what ways is *The Thirteenth Tale* a classic, gothic novel?
6. Miss Winter frequently changes points of view from third to first person, from “they” to “we” to “I,” in telling Margaret her story. The first time she uses “I” is in the recounting of Isabelle's death and Charlie's disappearance. What did you make of this shifting when Margaret points it out on page 204?
7. Compare and contrast Margaret, Miss Winter, and Aurelius — the three “ghosts” of the novel who are also each haunted by their pasts.
8. It is a classic writer's axiom that a symbol must appear at least three times in a story so that the reader knows that you meant it as a symbol. In *The Thirteenth Tale*, the novel *Jane Eyre* appears several times. Discuss the appearances and allusions to *Jane Eyre* and how this novel echoes that one.
9. The story shifts significantly after the death of Mrs. Dunne and John Digence. Adeline steps forward as intelligent, well-spoken, and confident — the “girl in the mists” emerges. Did you believe this miraculous transformation? If not, what did you suspect was really going on?
10. Dr. Clifton tells Margaret that she is “suffering from an ailment that afflicts ladies of romantic imagination” when he learns that she is an avid reader of novels such as *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Sense and Sensibility*. What do you think he means by drawing such a parallel? What other parallels exist between *The Thirteenth Tale* and classic 19th century literature?

11. When did you first suspect Miss Winter's true identity? Whether you knew or not, looking back, what clues did she give to Margaret (and what clues did the author give to you)?
12. Margaret tells Aurelius that her mother preferred telling "weightless" stories in place of heavy ones, and that sometimes it's better "not to know." Do you agree or disagree?
13. The title of this novel is taken from the title of Miss Winter's first book, *Thirteen Tales of Change and Desperation*, a collection of twelve stories with a mysterious thirteenth left out at the last minute before publication. How is this symbolic of the novel? What is the thirteenth tale?
14. When do you think *The Thirteenth Tale* takes place? The narrator gives some hints, but never tells the exact date. Which aspects of the book gave you a sense of time, and which seemed timeless? Did the question of time affect your experience with the novel?

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