



## Reading Group Guide

### *Shadows of Ladenbrooke Manor*

By Melanie Dobson

*This reading group guide for **Shadows of Ladenbrooke Manor** includes an introduction, discussion questions, and a Q&A with author **Melanie Dobson**. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion.*

### **Introduction**

*Years ago, the body of Oliver Croft, heir of Lord Croft of Ladenbrooke Manor, was found drowned in the River Coln. Authorities searched for answers, but no one was ever held responsible for Oliver's death...*

Libby Doyle, a free spirit who spends much of her time dancing with the butterflies in Ladenbrooke's gardens, has captured the heart of Oliver Croft. But after Oliver drowns, Libby also vanishes, and her parents, Walter and Maggie Doyle, are left to wonder what really happened between their daughter and the boy who lived next door.

Forty-five years later, after her father's death, Heather Toulson returns to her family's cottage in the English countryside, in the shadows of Ladenbrooke Manor, to sort through her parent's things. What she uncovers is a string of shocking secrets that lead her to wonder if anything Walter and Maggie told her about her childhood was true.

As Heather sorts through the belongings left behind in the cottage, trying to separate truth from deceit, she has an uncomfortable reunion with her first love. Together, they unravel a mystery that will change everything she thought she knew about herself and her family.

## Topics & Questions for Discussion

- 1) At the beginning of the novel, Maggie feels as if suicide is her only option. After she is rescued, she begins to create a story to protect both herself and her child, and her stories are passed down through the generations in the Doyle family. What are the implications for Maggie's deceit?
- 2) Walter's anger toward Maggie and her lies consume him at times, but he still chooses to stay married and raise Libby as his daughter. How does his commitment impact the Doyle family?
- 3) Walter wants Libby to face her fears while Maggie wants to protect her daughter from the world and the children who tease her. In hindsight, would anything else have helped Libby succeed?
- 4) Each of the mothers in the book, including Lady Croft, want the best for their children, but each woman has a unique way of relating to her kids. What are some of the positive and negative traits of these moms?
- 5) In the 1950s, mothers of children on the autism spectrum were often called "refrigerator moms" because doctors believed the coldness of a mother triggered the autism in their child. We know now this isn't true, but it is still easy to judge both the skills of a parent and the behavior issues of a child like Libby. How can we offer compassion and insight to the people we love in a beneficial way?
- 6) Libby is a successful artist while Heather is an art restorer. How does the difference in their professions reflect in their personal relationships?
- 7) Before Heather discovers the truth about Libby, she contemplates the following: "Anyone willing to expose their heart and mind through art, opening themselves and their work to both praise and critique, was a brave soul" (p. 15). How does Heather's appreciation for art and artists prepare her for the relationship between her and Libby?

- 8) Walter writes that it can be harmful to fixate on the past without using those reflections to make a positive change in the future. How does past shame hold people back from becoming the man or woman God intended them to be? And how do both Walter and Heather confront the past in order to change their family's future?
- 9) In Walter's journal, he also says that God often gives us our desires in a different way than we expect because He knows exactly what we need (p. 94). Do you believe this to be true? If so, do you have a personal example of how God created beauty out of a hard situation in your life?
- 10) Daphne Westcott is a faithful friend to Maggie Doyle, and in her faithfulness, she kept some of Maggie's secrets for almost fifty years. Do you think Daphne did the right thing in harboring these secrets? If not, what might she have done differently?
- 11) Many of the characters—including Maggie, Walter, Libby and Oliver Croft—feel trapped, and it is often hard to navigate right and wrong when someone is entrenched inside a difficult situation. How do you think clearly and seek wisdom when you don't know what to do?
- 12) Butterflies and shadows are two predominant symbols in *Shadows of Ladenbrooke Manor*. What do these symbols represent to you?
- 13) As Heather uncovers the past, the light of God's truth reveals and then begins to heal what happened long ago. Do you have an example of reconciliation or healing from a past wound?
- 14) Often the hero or heroine is someone who quietly sacrifices his or her life for someone else. Who are the unexpected heroes and/or heroines in this book?
- 15) As Oliver watches Libby in his mother's gardens (p. 125), he thinks: "She seemed to understand what so many people did not. That happiness was not found in trying to pigeonhole one's self into another's ideal. Happiness was found in embracing all you were created to be." Have you embraced your God-given talents and gifts? If not, what is standing in your way?

## **A Conversation with Melanie Dobson**

**Q: In your latest book, *Shadows of Ladenbrooke Manor*, we meet 19-year-old Maggie who finds herself in an unwed pregnancy during a time period when that was socially unacceptable. What does this situation mean for her and her family?**

Maggie lost her biological parents during World War II, and her beloved younger brother died in an orphanage after the war. Heartbroken and scared, she was raised by foster parents near Bristol, England. In the 1950s, British mothers often told their children that a midwife or a stork brought each new baby, so many young women were naïve about the facts of life. Maggie and her foster mother never discussed where babies came from.

Maggie craves love at the beginning of this story, but the father of her baby has sailed away from their coastal village, and she knows this unexpected pregnancy will humiliate her foster family. Since she has no place else to turn, Maggie begins to contemplate suicide, thinking it will be better for her child to be cradled in heaven rather than dying slowly in an orphanage like Maggie's brother.

**Q: Maggie chooses a stable, safe love with Walter Doyle instead of renewing a romance with the biological father of her child. Why did you choose to have Maggie's husband as the hero of this story?**

Walter is the victim of Maggie's deception, but he is committed to their marriage even after he finds out that he isn't the father of Libby, Maggie's child. Walter spends part of the story wallowing in his anger and bitterness, but, by the grace of God, the love for his wife is reawakened, and he begins to appreciate Libby's creativity and beauty. As Walter experiences the power of forgiveness and grace, the healing process begins for his entire family. He spends the latter part of his life rescuing Libby, and the lessons he learns are passed along in the journaled reflections on his life.

**Q: *Shadows of Ladenbrooke Manor* spans four generations of women, slipping back and forth between a past and contemporary story. Why do the three older women keep secrets from their daughters? How far are some people willing to go to cover the shame of their past?**

Mother-daughter relationships can be complicated. This relationship can be one of the closest a woman might experience, but it can also be one of the most hurtful. In both the past and present parts of the story, the mothers kept secrets from their daughters in order to protect them, but as these secrets are passed down through generations, they almost destroy their family.

While these women believe they are protecting the people they love, they are really protecting themselves. The wounds from shame have been around since Adam and Eve sinned against God and then hid themselves in the perfect garden. Like Adam and Eve, many of us are willing to go a long way to cover up sin or abuse from our past. This makes me even more grateful for the grace of God that has the power to redeem our past and cleanse all our shame.

**Q: The contemporary story features a descendant of Maggie's named Heather who is dealing with the complicated relationship she had with her father. Can you identify with Heather's feelings about this?**

Thankfully, I have a fantastic relationship with my dad! I dedicated this novel to him, because he has been a faithful, caring father who loves God and his kids. I do have other complicated relationships in my family that remain unhealed, but even though our family has experienced some hard times, my dad has been rock for all of us. I pray that I will have a lifelong friendship with my girls like I've had with my father.

**Q: Why did you choose to weave the theme of butterflies through this story?**

Maggie's daughter, Libby, is a unique young woman who is fascinated by butterflies. She is a beautiful, passionate girl who thrives on wandering among the flowers in Ladenbrooke's gardens and spilling her heart on the pages of her sketchbook. Even though she struggles socially, Libby is enchanted by the beauty and dance of butterflies. As she grows older, Libby loves creating colorful butterflies — her friends — through painting, and these butterflies ultimately bring new life to her as well.

I chose to use the example of butterflies throughout this story because of their struggle to break free of the cocoon that both shelters and confines them and because of their transformation into elegant, vibrant creatures that rely on the sun for life. Once we allow God to peel back the shame and guilt that bind us, we — like these magical butterflies — are finally free to be exactly who He made us to be.

**Q: How does the bond that forms between Libby and Heather change the way they view their pasts?**

The journals Walter left behind help Heather understand what happened to her family and how the truth can change the future of her relationships with Libby, Ella, and her ex-fiancé Christian Westcott. When Libby and Heather reunite, Libby shows Heather how the gift of creating art can bring healing while Heather uses her gift of art restoration to help restore Libby's heart as well. Together they seek and find the truth about what happened to Oliver Croft, the man Libby loved long ago.

**Q: You've said if Libby had been born in modern times, she could have fallen on the autism spectrum. Why did you choose to include that aspect as part of her story?**

My oldest daughter has sensory processing issues, and we have journeyed with friends throughout the years who have children on this spectrum as well. Parents of kids on the autism spectrum often experience a lot of guilt and shed many tears on behalf of their son or daughter. Until parents have a diagnosis, there is a lot of confusion as to why their child is different than other kids and why they struggle to do seemingly simple tasks when really they are fighting to survive. There can also be judgment from teachers and other adults who are confused or uneducated—like my husband and I used to be—about this spectrum.

Children on the autism spectrum often struggle with self-control and relationships, but they can also be incredibly bright, passionate people, such as Libby, who excel at art or science or whatever talents God has given them. In this story, I wanted to celebrate these wonderful kids and encourage moms, in particular, who might feel hopeless and alone.

**Q: Do you think sensitivity and understanding for those with autism has increased in modern times? What can individuals do to help change the way society views and interacts with those impacted by autism?**

I am incredibly grateful for the advances in understanding the spectrum of autism and all the amazing techniques, exercises and therapies to help kids on this spectrum succeed. Still many children with Sensory Processing Disorder are misdiagnosed. It's important to continue educating parents and teachers about the range of this spectrum and how children with heightened sensory awareness might

react with fear or anger when they feel threatened. It is also helpful when parents of children on the autism spectrum are able to be honest about the successes and failures of their journey. Instead of judging, we should all encourage parents who love their kids but feel discouraged on their quest for answers.

**Q: Willow Cottage, the home of the Doyle family, sits in the shadows of the Croft family's Ladenbrooke Manor. What is the significance of these shadows?**

The Crofts are an upper class, noble family in England while Walter and Maggie Doyle are solidly middle class. During the 1950s, there were strict society rules between the British classes, but both Oliver (the son of Lord and Lady Croft) and Libby (the Doyles' daughter) defy these rules. Like the boundaries of society, a stone wall separated Ladenbrooke Manor and Willow Cottage until tragedy strikes both families and these social boundaries begin to crumble. Ultimately God's light shines through the shadows on both sides of the wall.

**Q: Your favorite characters to write about are everyday heroes and heroines who sacrifice their lives for someone else. Do any of your characters sacrifice their lives in *Shadows of Ladenbrooke Manor*?**

I am fascinated by seemingly ordinary people today and throughout history who have done extraordinary things to help others. In *Shadows of Ladenbrooke Manor*, Walter chooses to sacrifice his career and his plans for the future to raise Maggie's daughter. He grows to love Libby, and even though his emotions are tumultuous throughout this story, Walter ultimately decides to accept and care for this girl he believes God has given him. Also, Maggie originally thinks that taking her own life, along with the life of her unborn daughter, is the most loving thing to do for her child, but Walter stops her from killing herself. She ultimately sacrifices herself to fight for Libby and to care for Libby's daughter.

**Q: Despite the fear of disappointing people we love, how can we learn to live our lives in the light of truth instead of hiding?**

One of the verses I cling to regularly as a parent is 2 Corinthians 12:9: "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." Christ ripped the veil of our shame in two when He died so we no longer have to hide behind it. I love when women of different generations are honest with one another about their weaknesses and offer each other grace, just as Christ gave freely to each of us.

**Q: There seem to be some similarities in time period and setting between the BBC's surprise hit *Call the Midwife* and *Shadows of Ladenbrooke Manor*. Why do you think *Call the Midwife* has become such a popular program in both England and the United States, and what are some of the parallels between this show and your latest novel?**

Viewers love *Call the Midwife* for many reasons, but some of the main reasons are because it's a show about a character reflecting back on her life during the 1950s with new clarity and because of the rich themes of faith and morality that echo through the generations. Also, the stories take an honest look at both the beauty and sometimes sorrow that happen with each new birth. Each episode is authentic in its display of inner and external conflict while maintaining its focus on the relationship between God and humanity.

The story in *Shadows of Ladenbrooke Manor* is also bound together by Walter's journal entries as he reflects back on life in England during a similar era. I hope readers will appreciate the honest perspective of the challenges of an unexpected pregnancy and wrestle through their own emotions alongside the characters. Also similar to *Call the Midwife*, the themes of faith and grace are integral to this story.

**Q: Could you tell us about the trip you took to research this book?**

I visit all the main settings of my novels to capture the spirit and culture of each location along with the sights, sounds and even tastes of the area. I spent a week on a "whistle stop" tour of England last spring, exploring Oxford, London, Bristol and the lovely manor homes in the Cotswolds. I thoroughly enjoyed my many pots of English tea, sleeping in homes that were almost 1,000 years old and meandering through cottage gardens around Oxford. I also had the pleasure of meeting up with friends and fellow novelists Carrie Turansky and Cathy Gohlke while they researched for their upcoming novels and then spending the day with a lovely British woman named Evelyn who thought my novel should be set in the quaint village called Bibury. Turns out, she was exactly right!



**Q: You have said you almost feel a compulsion to write. What do you mean by that?**

Someone gave me a red journal when I was seven, and I've loved to write and create stories ever since. I enjoy the challenge of researching and writing fiction, and when I'm not working on a new book, I'm either making up stories for my girls or dreaming about ideas for my next novel. I'm not an artist like Libby, but I believe we all have talents and abilities that God wants us to use. Writing is life giving to me, and I get cranky (as my family will confirm!) when I take too long of a break from my pen and paper.

**Q: Ultimately, what is the main message of *Shadows of Ladenbrooke Manor*?**

*Shadows of Ladenbrooke Manor* was my exploration of God's light shining through the shadows of life, along with the beauty and power of His restoration through generations. The story is ultimately about transformation — how even in the hardest situations God can weave together a story of hope and redemption and create incredible beauty from the ashes of our lives.

### **Butterfly Princess Gallery**

Libby Doyle loves to paint butterflies in *Shadows of Ladenbrooke Manor*. To celebrate the theme of transformation in this novel, Melanie is creating a gallery on her website of butterfly paintings and sketches from her readers and/or their children or grandchildren. If you would like to submit a butterfly picture for this gallery, please email it to Melanie at [comments@melaniedobson.com](mailto:comments@melaniedobson.com), and she will send you the link of your picture when it appears on the gallery.