

Reading Guide

Mary

By Janis Cooke Newman

Introduction

In this dazzling triumph of historical fiction, Janis Cooke Newman explores the enigmatic life of Mary Todd Lincoln, the first president's wife to be referred to as "First Lady." From the days of her girlhood to the years after her husband's assassination, Mary is a force to be reckoned with. After the loss of her beloved sons, Mary battles the fears and passions that send her on her legendary shopping sprees and force her family deep into debt. When her husband is killed, Mary succumbs to desperation and contemplates her own sanity on the lunatics' porch at Bellevue Place. With keen sensitivity and a devotion to historical detail, Newman brings to life a woman who courageously sought to live according to the dictates of her own mind while restoring her family's tarnished honor. Above all, Newman's novel is an intimate portrait of Mary Todd Lincoln's bittersweet triumph over the social and political constraints of her day, and the deeply private legacies that have captured the American imagination for generations.

This guide is designed to enhance your experience of Janis Cooke Newman's *Mary*. We hope it will enrich your exploration of this extraordinary novel.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. In the book's opening pages, Mary asks Dr. Patterson how long she will have to stay at Bellevue Place. From her descriptions of the conversation and of her life at the asylum, do you believe Mary is insane? What does her tone tell you as she begins to narrate the events of her life?
2. At Bellevue Place, Mary befriends Minnie Judd. Janis Cooke Newman has said that though Minnie is based upon a real woman who was committed to Bellevue Place at the same time as Mary Lincoln, she is, in fact, a fictional character. Why do you imagine the author created this fictional character? What purpose does she serve? Were you disappointed to learn that Minnie wasn't real? Do you think that writers of historical fiction have the leeway to create fictional main characters?
3. Mary speaks of the many anorectic ladies at Bellevue Place, and the author has said that her research showed that a large percentage of the asylum's inmates had been committed for anorexia. Does it surprise you to learn that anorexia was so prevalent during the 1800s or that it was considered a symptom of insanity?
4. What is Mary's attitude toward passion and pleasure? Describe the first sexual encounter between Mary and Mr. Lincoln and what happens afterward. How does Mr. Lincoln view Mary's desire? How does his melancholy affect Mary's self-expression?

5. How do society's prevailing beliefs about emotion and reason shape Mary's decision that Mr. Lincoln will be her husband? Does this attitude help or hinder her in making a successful marriage and life for herself?
6. On their trip to New York, Mr. Wood tells Mary, "Not everyone is granted a large passion. . . . Suppressing it would be like curbing a rare talent for the piano or a great facility with paint." How does Mary respond to Mr. Wood's advances? What does she tell herself she will do if she feels desire for him again? How does this episode fit into the theme of "restraint" portrayed in the novel? Does restraint play a bigger role in the lives of the female or the male characters?
7. In your opinion, why does Robert act the way he does toward his mother? Do you think that he believes his mother is insane?
8. Janis Cooke Newman has referred to Robert Lincoln as her novel's villain. Do you believe he was a villain or does your opinion of Robert shift throughout the novel?
9. At different times in her life, Mary engages in compulsive shopping. Why does Mrs. Lincoln begin visiting the shops of Pennsylvania Avenue when she and her husband arrive in Washington City? What does she hope to accomplish with this shopping? Is Mary's faith in the magical properties of objects a form of insanity?
10. Mary begins her own story with the death of her mother. How does Mary's reaction to her mother's death anticipate how she will defend herself against grief and loss in the future? Further, how does this early loss affect how she approaches her relationships with her husband and her son Robert?
11. Mary recounts, "With Eddie's death it seemed that I had forfeited not only my youngest son, but also my claim upon motherhood. My other son felt as lost to me as Eddie, made distant by his nature, and his time in my father's house, and now my own unrestrained grieving." What accounts for the differences in the way the members of the Lincoln family grieved?
12. Though Lincoln fails at his initial bids for a U.S. Senate seat, how do the debates with Stephen Douglas shape Lincoln's political career? Why does Elizabeth say to Mary, "I am concerned with how completely you have unsexed yourself"? Describe Mary's ambition and how she views her own involvement in her husband's career. Do today's wives of politicians view their roles in a similar way? What are the contemporary behaviors that are expected of a "well-bred wife"?
13. In the book, Mary says that the story of her attempt at suicide appears on the front page of the *Chicago Inter Ocean*, "where appear all the worst stories about me." Describe Mary's relationship with the press. How does it change over the course of her life, from the days following her husband's nomination, through her time as First Lady, during the Old Clothes Scandal, and after Robert has her committed for lunacy? Do you think today's First Ladies are subjected to a similar scrutiny?

14. How does Myra Bradwell influence Mary's understanding of her situation at Bellevue and offer her hope? Do you instinctively like or recoil from this character?

15. When Lizzie Keckly and Mary travel to New York, Mary begins attending séances, hoping to feel Willie's presence. She continues to visit séances after Taddie's death. Was it possible for a medium to truly help her, emotionally or otherwise? Do you think that Mary believed that the spirits of her sons visited her during these séances?

16. What led to Mary's betrayal by Messrs. Brady and Keyes? By Lizzie Keckly? How does she remain steadfast in her determination to provide for her family and herself despite such grievous losses and disappointments?

17. What was your reaction to the novel's closing scenes? Was it necessary for Mary to avoid giving her writing to her son as she had originally intended?

18. What was your opinion of Mary Lincoln before reading the novel? Did this change in any way after you finished the book? What new perspectives on womanhood, marriage, and the tandem of emotions and reason did you gain by reading Mary's story?

About the Author

Janis Cooke Newman is the author of the memoir *The Russian Word for Snow*. She lives in northern California, where she teaches writing classes at the renowned independent bookseller Book Passage.

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Discussion questions written by Amy Root