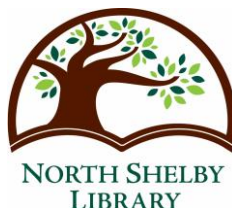


DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Lisa thinks to herself on page 52 that '...life was, in all manner of possibilities, truly now and almost tangibly beginning.' Discuss the idea that it is only when the characters have the courage to enter into an honest dialogue that the possibilities for their relationships begin.
2. Frank might be 'a bastard of the standard-issue variety' but as the novel progresses Frank becomes a man we ache for in his 'unarticulated anguish'. Do you agree?
3. The growing intimacy between Patty and Frank is acutely observed. Discuss the night that Frank left and the day that he returned. Discuss the hungers in their relationship. Discuss the hungers in other characters.
4. Discuss the idea that like the Southern suburbs, which are described as 'terra incognita', many things are not yet mapped or documented in the lives and relationships in the book.
5. Stefan and Rudi stand in stark contrast to the Australian men in the novel. Discuss the ways that the Australian men in the text are as trapped as their wives. Do any of the men break the roles set for them?
6. Magda and Stefan each survived hell and yet they are colour while the women in Goode's are black. How does St John create this contrast and for what purpose? How do the clothes and food parallel the characters?
7. Clive James comments that 'In The Women in Black, Madeleine St John evoked the collision of modern European history and the still-awakening Australian culture...' Discuss this idea.
8. In what ways does Lisa symbolise the awakening Australian culture? What comment is St John making about the importance of art?
9. The Women in Black has been described as a comic masterpiece. Discuss some of the funniest lines and moments in the text. How does St John create scenes of warmth and humour?
10. Christopher Potter, publisher of Madeleine St John's novels at Fourth Estate, comments that 'Beneath the sly and witty veneer of her writing, she explores questions that are basically theological: we must do the right thing, but how can we tell what the right thing is?' In what ways does St John explore this theme in The Women in Black?
11. For Lisa, Blake's poem is mysterious and enticing. Discuss why St John might have made reference to Blake's work in her novel. Discuss too, her reasons for including references to Anna Karenina, Emma and Tender is the Night.
12. In some ways St John explores how family and connection can limit people. In other ways she shows the emptiness of life without connection.
13. What idea is St John exploring through the character of Miss Jacobs?



14. Mrs Miles comments to her daughter, 'Lisa. If only you knew what being grown up can be like, you wouldn't want to do it any faster than you have to.' How do some characters change their circumstances? Despite the sadness in the text, humour and hope dominate. Do you agree?

15. Kaz Cooke comments that the novel '...evokes another time while being mysteriously classic and up-to-date...' How are the themes raised in the novel relevant today?

