

MISS GARNET'S ANGEL Reading Group Guide

1. 'Miss Garnet's Angel' novel has been described as a book that defies any neat categorisation. So what kind of a novel is this? A romance? A mystery? A tale of religious awakening? What is the effect of the multi-layered strands?
- 2 "Can't be doing with that," Miss Garnet tells herself upon first seeing the Bellini picture of the Virgin and Christ child above her bed. With this moment her atheist-communist wariness is established but it also foreshadows the spiritual and emotional transformations to come. Describe the change Julia Garnet undergoes over the course of her stay in Venice. What effects do the events and discoveries of her visit have on her sense of self, as a communist grounded in atheism and as a woman?
3. "Long ago she had decided that history does not repeat itself; but perhaps when a thing was true it went on returning in different likenesses, borrowing from what went before, finding new ways to declare itself." The idea of recurrence, that the present is often a reflection - albeit a reinterpretation - of the past, is an important theme in 'Miss Garnet'. Consider the parallels between the narrative of Tobit and that of Julia, Toby and Sarah. Do they comment on and amplify each other?
4. Consider the way the novel establishes dual meanings for "blindness": as a physical condition on one hand, and as a more abstract reference to the capacity for empathy, love, or self-awareness on the other. What kinds of blindnesses does the narrative show us?
5. With the opening lines of the novel, we are introduced to a character who comes to haunt all that follows: Death. "It leaves a hole in the fabric of things which those who are left behind try to repair." Tobias invokes death as a metaphor for sexual penetration; Harriet comes to "life" as the novel unfolds and awaits Julia at the end of the book. Consider the relationship between death and life in the novel. What might the author be trying to show us here?
6. "We cannot commission desire," Julia reflects, referring not only to herself but also to Carlo. How does her disappointment over Carlo, and her subsequent break down, enlarge her vision? Does this link with her ability finally to see, when others can't, the Archangel Raphael?
- 7 The Monsignore appears quite late in the book and is the only other character in the contemporary story who has seen Raphael. What is the Monsignor's role? Are there any clues or hints to his differences from the other human characters? Although, for much of their lives, they've held starkly different philosophical ideologies, what fundamental values are he and Julia Garnet shown to share?
8. What is the role in the story of the bridge by the Chiesa Angelo Raffaele at the edge of the campo? Are there any links between the scenes where it appears.
9. Near the end of the novel, Julia encounters a young woman on a train named Saskia. As they talk, Julia experiences "the strangest sensation." And later, Julia reflects that "the meeting had crystallised something for her." What has happened here? Is it significant that she has just come from a wedding?
10. The Carpaccio painting on the cover of 'Miss Garnet' was John Ruskin's favourite. Salley Vickers has also chosen a quote from Ruskin (who wrote 'The Stones of Venice') for the epigraph at the beginning of the novel. How are Ruskin's words reflected in the book's presentation, structure and style? Does this have any bearing on the ambiguity of the closing scenes of the book? How do the ancient and modern stories finally flow together and what does this tell us about the novel's view of "endings"?