

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

The Blind Assassin by Margaret Atwood

- Margaret Atwood was born in 1939. She is an essayist, novelist and poet. She lives in a rural area near Toronto, Canada, with her husband, Graeme Gibson. The couple have three grown children and a cat.
- The novel has three narrative lines: Iris in the present, Iris and Laura's story written for Sabrina (p. 513), and excerpts from the sci-fi Blind Assassin.
- What is the effect of the newspaper accounts that are throughout the book?
- Who wrote the science fiction Blind Assassin? (p. 512)
- What is the plot of the science fiction book and how does it relate to the novel as a whole?
- Who had the affair with Alex? (p. 488)
- Atwood won an award for literary excellence in crime writing. Is this a crime novel or a novel about a crime? What is the difference?
 - What is the crime? Who committed it? Is/are he/she/they caught and punished?
 - Who is/are the victims?
 - What is the mystery? Is it solved?
 - Is there anyone in the novel who is innocent?
- Why does Laura kill herself? Is there any connection between this occasion and her earlier attempt? (p. 150)
- What is the meaning of "Supreme Sacrifice" – "soldiers gave their lives for the rest of us...?"
- How did Laura misunderstand the first time? Did she misunderstand this time? (p. 488-490)
- What was Laura's "fatal triangular bargain"? Richard, Laura and Alex? Or Iris, Laura and Alex? (p. 513, p. 518)
- What is so appealing about Alex to both Iris and Laura?
- What is the meaning of the hand as a symbol? Does it change between the Prologue (p. 5) and the Epilogue? (p. 517)
- Does Iris hold herself responsible for Laura's death? (p. 2, p. 490)
 - Is she responsible? "Was I my sister's keeper?" (p. 429) Yes (p. 85)
 - Connection with her mother's death bed (p. 93)
 - How old was Iris when her mother died? (p. 6, p. 9)
 - What was her relationship with her father? (p. 101, p. 160, p. 167)
 - Why does Iris tell Laura about Alex in the way she does? What is the importance of the phrase, "True believer"? The importance of the pond? (97, 487)
- What is Laura like? "not selfless, she was skinless which is a different thing" (p. 73)
 - No skin to protect her from seeing. Example, her father as Santa (p. 385)
 - What was her reason for painting Iris blue? Is she sleeping? (p. 195)
 - What is the significance of the marriage and the clothes? (p. 237)
 - What does she mean by, "Richard killed father"? (p. 327)
- What is the effect of having Reenie speak in clichés? (p. 178)
 - "Whose voice did I hear when I wanted a running commentary?" (p. 504)



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- Did you guiltily respond to the descriptions of clothes? (p. 127, p. 312)
- How do these phrases fit the overall theme? And our time?
 - “Tragedy is not one long scream...” (p. 417)
 - “She knows herself to be at the mercy of events and events have no mercy.” (p. 463)
 - “Gods come in handy...” (p. 27)
- What is the meaning of the destruction of Sakiel-Norn? (p. 117-118)
 - Commentary on 9/11 and the 21st century? (p. 477)
- What does this description of science fiction mean for the novel? “The purpose of science fiction is to allow the author to satirize his/her time and place.”
- Planet Zycron – the pile of stones – “marks both an act of deliberate remembrance and an act of deliberate forgetting”.
 - The meaning of memorials (p. 12)
 - “real city shrunk small” – Allegory of the Cave (p. 12)
- What is the significance of the class system on Sakiel-Norn? (p. 16)
- How does Iris’s version of the boy and girl’s end (p. 343) differ from Alex’s (p. 344)?
- Who is the Blind Assassin? (p. 22)
 - Symbolism: Childhood experiences create inner blindness – fitted for service, senses are alert, become killers. “Only the blind are free.”
 - What is the meaning of the girl who can’t speak? (p. 30)
- Did Alex love Iris? Could they have been happy together? (Will and Boyd – p. 355-56)
 - “He might die for her but living for her would be quite different.” (p. 402)
- Why does Iris go along with Laura’s imprisonment? (p. 431 – dark baby-p. 432)
 - Her final time with Aimee (p. 436)
 - Laura’s first message – altered photos (p. 451)
 - How does she finally “talk” to Iris? What does she say?
 - Latin – Dido released to death by Iris
 - History – the picture of Laura and Alex
 - Geography – Port Ticonderoga
 - French – Alex’s scifi words
 - Mathematics – times with Richard
- Why does Richard kill himself? (p. 507-08)
- Why did Richard chose the Water Nixie to die in? (p. 511)
- Did Iris indeed fail to convey him? (p. 479)