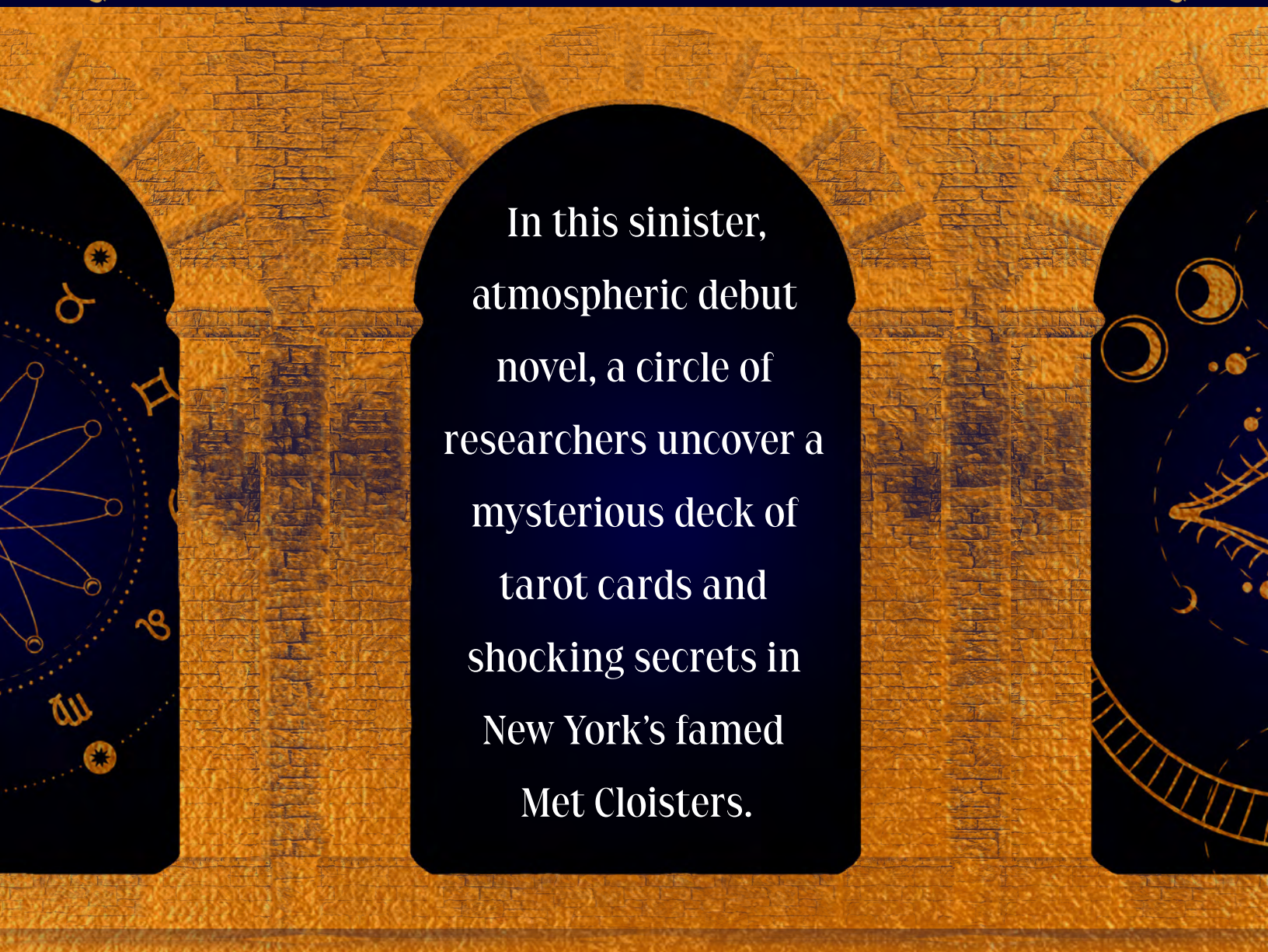


READING GROUP GUIDE



INTRODUCTION



In this sinister, atmospheric debut novel, a circle of researchers uncover a mysterious deck of tarot cards and shocking secrets in New York's famed Met Cloisters.

This reading group guide for *The Cloisters* includes discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Katy Hays. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The events of *The Cloisters* take place over one summer. How does the season and summer weather reflect Ann's emotions and evolution throughout the novel?
2. Patrick and Rachel are first introduced in Chapter 2. What were your first impressions of each of them? Discuss the events that resulted in Ann working at The Cloisters?
3. Patrick is Rachel's mentor, but he is also her lover. How does this dynamic complicate the situation at The Cloisters? Who do you think had more power in their relationship, and what form did that power take?
4. Early on, Rachel steals a cookie from the café, and later we see her play pranks on Moira, in addition to taking the tiles to identify plants in the garden and stealing a boat. What do these incidents tell us about Rachel? How do all of these "games" foreshadow the dark and dangerous choices she has made over the years?
5. What do you think Ann's motivations were to not share all of Lingraf's writings with Rachel and to hide the false-fronted card from Patrick? How might the story have been different if she had shared this information with the team?
6. Loss is central to both Ann's and Rachel's stories. Discuss some of their major (and minor) losses throughout the book and how these may have shaped them as characters.
7. Laure warns Ann about Rachel's past—why do you think Ann becomes so defensive of Rachel? At this point, do you think their friendship is a healthy one?
8. Discuss how Lingraf becomes central to the mystery and uncovering the truth.
9. Ann and Rachel come from very different backgrounds, but at the end of the novel, Rachel insists that they are the same. What personality traits do each of them share? How are they different? Ultimately, do you think Rachel is right?
10. In Chapter 4, Ann expresses how "Walla Walla would always feel like death to me" (p. 33). Do you think the same can be said for The Cloisters after her summer there?
11. In the end, was it fate that decided what happened to these characters or the choices they made?
12. During the prologue, Ann talks about how she missed "the omens that haunted The Cloisters that summer." Having finished the novel, what were the omens? How did the prologue foreshadow the importance (or not) of Fate?
13. Both tarot and astrology play a significant role in today's discourse. These days, it seems as if everyone knows their rising sign or has tarot deck. How do those contemporary practices relate to the historic practices outlined in *The Cloisters*? Are they different? Similar? Do you use either device, and if so, why?



ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. As Ann dives into her research at The Cloisters, she learns about different types of divination and fortune telling, including augury, pyromancy, cleromancy, lots, and tarot. Research the history of these practices. Why do you think there is a growing interest in them today?
2. Leo introduces Ann to many of the plants grown in the gardens, including some that are poisonous. List the plants mentioned, and see if you can identify any at a local botanical garden.
3. The Met Cloisters is a real museum in New York City. Learn more about the museum at [MetMuseum.org/Visit/Plan-Your-Visit/Met-Cloisters](https://www.metmuseum.org/Visit/Plan-Your-Visit/Met-Cloisters) or plan an in-person visit!



A CONVERSATION WITH KATY HAYS

Q: There's a lot of history woven into the book, particularly regarding art and tarot cards. What was your research process like?

A: As is true for many academics, a research rabbit hole is my happy place! But surprisingly, I found very little existing scholarship on Renaissance tarot. When that happens, as a researcher, you start to look at topics that might intersect or surround the lacuna so you can set the scene. In the case of tarot, that meant turning to questions of chance (particularly as they related to card play), as well as fate, fortune, and free will. Renaissance Europe, and Italy in particular, was absolutely *obsessed* with these issues, and that literature offered me more than enough material to work with!

Q: Is there anything you learned that you wish could have made it into the book?

A: I read a wonderful book by Mary Quinlan-McGrath, *Influences: Art, Optics, and Astrology in the Italian Renaissance*. In it, Quinlan-McGrath argues that anyone with a bit of power during the Renaissance (Popes, aristocrats, philosophers, etc.) believed that *painted* representations of celestial bodies could impact someone's horoscope. I remember reading her book and thinking: this is absolutely the weirdest thing I have ever read! For example, if my Mercury is in Scorpio and I'm standing under a constellation of Taurus, just *standing under the painting* will make my communication sluggish? *What?* I wish more of that could have made it in!

Q: Atmospheric is the perfect word to describe *The Cloisters*. How did you get in the mindset to write something so sensory?

A: I was working on the book during Covid, so while I had visited The Cloisters many years before, it wasn't possible to go travel there while I was writing the book. To fill the gaps, I relied heavily on Google Street View, which allowed me to "walk" through Fort Tryon Park, see the exterior of the museum, and "walk" other streets in New York. Additionally, through my teaching work, I knew the Met had incredible digital resources to support their collections. That access was critical to completing the book. But also, I have to say—a playlist of Gregorian chants helped too!

Q: One quote that stuck with me in *The Cloisters* was: "Your interpretation of choice is a luxury, a curtain that separates us from fate" (p. 283). Ann and the other characters ruminate on themes of fate throughout the book. Did writing this book clarify your own thoughts on fate versus free will? If so, what are they?

A: I've always been fascinated by the idea of luck. Luck is a spark, a scrap of magic, something we can't control, but that seems essential. In that sense, I've always considered luck and fate to be twins or, at a bare minimum, kissing cousins. I believe, like many, that choice and free will remain our primary source of power and give life shape and meaning. But there's no denying that something outside of our control—fate, luck, chance, *fortuna*—also plays a vital and sometimes outsized role in our lives.

“ I've always considered luck and fate to be twins. ”

Q: Ann is perpetually conscious of her outsider status in the world of academia, and you pull the veil back on the uglier sides of academia, such as how much nepotism, gatekeeping, and privilege permeates it. What do you hope readers learn about the interworkings of these institutions?

A: I don't think academia has cornered the market on nepotism, gatekeeping, or being privileged! And I do have to say that I think museums like the Met are working hard to turn the page when it comes to these outmoded ways of working and hiring. But what I think remains true about academia and the art world is the extent to which a pedigree matters. It doesn't have to be familial, but it does need to be institutional—the right schools, internships, recommenders. Those elements decide the outcome of someone's career and that quality—being anointed, almost—happens early.

Q: Do you have a favorite tarot card? And if so, what makes it your favorite?

A: This will come as no surprise—the Wheel of Fortune is my favorite card. It's a deeply lucky card. That said, I primarily use a classic Rider-Waite deck, and I'm always happy to see just about any card... so long as it's not a sword. That suit makes me nervous!

Q: Can you tell us a bit about what you're working on now?

A: Sure! I'm currently working on a novel that reimagines the House of Thebes and, particularly, the legacy of Harmonia's necklace, a cursed object in antiquity that brought misfortune to any woman who wore it. It's a family drama, set over the course of a wedding weekend in Italy, that deals with desire, social taboos, money, and creative ambition. I'm thinking of it as a cursed *Succession* meets *The Guest List*.

