



The Reading Party

Fenella Gentleman

'A fresh view of Oxford, seen through the eyes of a young woman historian appointed to a male college in 1976, who tells her own story with wit and feeling in this original and charming novel' Claire Tomalin

It is the 1970s and and Oxford's male institutions are finally opening their doors to women...

...Sarah Addleshaw, young, spirited and keen to prove her worth, begins term as the first female academic at her college. She is in fact, its only female 'Fellow'.

Impulsive love affairs – with people, places and the ideas in her head – beset Sarah throughout her first exhilarating year as a don, but it is the Reading Party that has the most dramatic impact.

Asked to accompany the first mixed group of students on the annual college trip to Cornwall, Sarah finds herself illicitly drawn to the suave American Tyler. Torn between professional integrity and personal feelings, she faces her biggest challenge yet.

Discussion Points

1. *The Reading Party* draws on Fenella Gentleman's experience of an Oxford college and its annual retreat. What impact does this have on the novel as a piece of fiction?
2. The novel is set in the 1970s, when women were newcomers in the male colleges. How is the flavour of this period conveyed?
3. Much of the tension in the story comes from Sarah Addleshaw's changing relationships with men such as Dr Loxton, Tyler Winston and the Dean. Which of them has most impact on her life?
4. There are 12 students on the Reading Party. Who does Sarah identify with and why? Do you feel the same?
5. Sarah, who considers herself a feminist, plans to 'transform the character' of a male institution. Why is this important to her? How much does she achieve?
6. Her mood fluctuates between exhilaration and paranoia. What makes her so changeable?

7. Part of *The Reading Party* is set in Oxford and part in Cornwall. Is the contrast between these two locations significant?
8. Dr Loxton describes the Reading Party as 'a pinprick in the timeline of the students' lives'; Sarah suggests it was 'seminal', at least for her. Why do they disagree?
9. The Prologue and the Epilogue give Sarah an opportunity to reflect on a key year in her life. How important are these devices to the story?
10. Fenella provides a Glossary of Oxford Terminology. How tricky were the customs and language that Sarah encountered? Have you encountered similar barriers in other situations?
11. The Historical Note mentions that there are now no single sex colleges at Oxford. Was it right to go mixed? Who benefited most: the men or the women?
12. Fenella says she admires the historical fiction of Helen Dunmore, the story-telling of Patrick Gale, and the pared-down writing of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*. How may they have influenced her?
13. Imagine you could create your own Reading Party. Where would you go, who would you take with you, what would you read and how would you spend your 'time out'?

About the author



Fenella Gentleman studied PPE at Wadham College, Oxford when it became mixed. She participated in two reading parties in Cornwall. After graduating she worked in publishing before moving into marketing and communications in the professions. She lives in London and North Norfolk.