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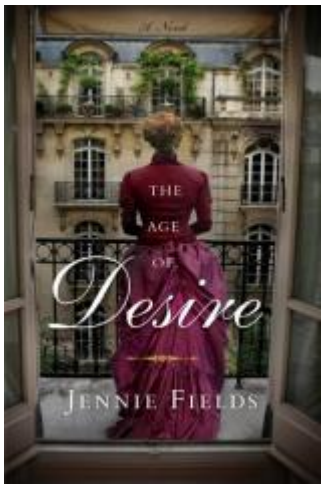
The Age of Desire

by Jennie Fields



About the Book

For fans of THE PARIS WIFE, a sparkling glimpse into the life of Edith Wharton and the scandalous love affair that threatened her closest friendship

They say behind every great man is a woman. Behind Edith Wharton, there was Anna Bahlmann --- her governess turned literary secretary, and her mothering, nurturing friend.

When at the age of 45, Edith falls passionately in love with a dashing younger journalist, Morton Fullerton, and is at last opened to the world of the sensual, it threatens everything certain in her life but especially her abiding friendship with Anna. As Edith's marriage crumbles and Anna's disapproval threatens to shatter their lifelong bond, the women must face the fragility at the heart of all friendships.

Told through the points of view of both women, THE AGE OF DESIRE takes us on a vivid journey through Wharton's early Gilded Age world: Paris with its glamorous literary salons and dark secret cafés, the Whartons' elegant house in Lenox, Massachusetts, and Henry James's manse in Rye, England.

Edith's real letters and intimate diary entries are woven throughout the book. THE AGE OF DESIRE brings to life one of literature's most beloved writers, whose own story was as complex and nuanced as that of any of the heroines she created.

Discussion Guide

1. Have you read any of Edith Wharton's books? How has reading this book altered your perception of her or her work? If you've not read any of her novels, has this book made you want to? Why or why not?

2. Lucretia Jones, Edith's mother, is stern with her husband and her daughter. What aspects of Edith's life and personality in this book might possibly be a result of Lucretia's parenting? Does Edith put any effort into overcoming her mother's influence?

3. How might it have been possible for Edith and Teddy to reach some sort of equilibrium in their marriage? Was it poisoned from the beginning? Why do you think so?

4. Edith ignores her friends' warnings about Morton. Even as evidence mounts that he has a lot of skeletons in his closet, Edith continues to ignore the facts. What is the root of her denial? What are other aspects of her life that elicit denial? How else does denial wreak havoc in her life?

5. If you had been Edith's friend, would you have warned her against getting involved with Morton? Would knowing her reaction toward Anna influence your decision? Would you try to intervene if one of your close friends today were to fall for someone he or she shouldn't?

6. Why doesn't Anna like Morton? What are some selfish reasons behind her dislike? What are the more justifiable reasons? What do you think of him?

7. What is Edith hoping to gain from the affair with Morton? Does she succeed? What about Morton? What do you think he's after? In what ways did Edith benefit from the affair? In what ways did it have a negative impact?

8. At what point in the novel is the affair between Edith and Morton over? When does Edith finally realize it?

9. Fame is a recurring theme in the book. When Anna sails on the *Amerika*, she's surprised that no one recognizes the name of her famous employer. When Edith hears any news of her books' success, she is buoyed. But fame always comes at a price. What are the consequences of fame in this book?

10. Anna says that Edith mustn't have had any choice, that the affair with Morton was inevitable. When looking back at unpleasant truths or impetuous behavior, it's sometimes a comfort to believe we had no choice in the matter. What do you think of Anna's assessment of Edith's actions? What are some situations in the book where someone truly didn't have a choice in his or her fate?

11. If Anna and Edith's friendship were to dissolve, who has more to lose? Why? Which of the two would be more likely to thrive?

12. How do you think the story would have played out if communication were more instant, similar to the way it is today? What if, instead of waiting for a letter, Edith was anticipating a text message? How has modern communication affected romance?

13. There are several moments in the novel where characters could take charge of their own lives and pursue happiness. Edith could have left Teddy. Anna could have confessed her love to Teddy. What stopped them?

14. The quote at the beginning of the introduction suggests that the closest friendships are the ones most likely to be compromised. Do you agree? What are some experiences you've had with close friendships that were neglected?

Author Bio

Jennie Fields received an MA in creative writing from the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop and is the author of the novels LILY BEACH, CROSSING BROOKLYN FERRY and THE MIDDLE AGES. An Illinois native, she spent 25 years as an advertising creative director in New York and currently lives with her husband in Nashville, Tennessee.

Critical Praise

"A fascinating insight into the life of my favorite novelist. Fields brings a secret side of Wharton to life, and shows us a woman whose elegant façade concealed a turbulent sensuality."

— Daisy Goodwin, author of THE AMERICAN HEIRESS

"With astonishing tenderness and immediacy, THE AGE OF DESIRE portrays the interwoven lives of Edith Wharton and Anna Bahlmann, her governess, secretary, and close friend. By focusing on these two women from vastly different backgrounds, Jennie Fields miraculously illuminates an entire era. . . . I gained insight into both Wharton's monumental work and her personal struggles-and I was filled with regret that I'd finished reading so soon."

— Lauren Belfer, author of CITY OF LIGHT and A FIERCE RADIANCE

"[Fields'] portrayal of Edith Wharton in love is imaginative and bold and offers a touching view of Wharton. . . . Fields immerses us in Wharton's household, her social milieu, and her most private self."

— Irene Goldman-Price, editor of MY DEAR GOVERNESS: The Letters of Edith Wharton to Anna Bahlmann

"In the vein of Loving Frank or The Paris Wife, Jennie Fields has created a page-turning period piece. Fields

portrays a woman whose life was hardly innocence and mirth, but passionate, complex, and more mysterious than one might ever imagine."

— Mary Morris, author of NOTHING TO DECLARE and REVENGE

"Somewhere between the repressiveness of Edith Wharton's early-20th-century AGE OF INNOCENCE and our own libertine SHADES OF GREY era lies the absorbingly sensuous world of Jennie Fields's THE AGE OF DESIRE . . . along with the overheated romance and the middle-age passion it so accurately describes, THE AGE OF DESIRE also offers something simpler and quieter: a tribute to the enduring power of female friendship."

— Boston Globe

"One doesn't have to be an Edith Wharton fan to luxuriate in the Wharton-esque plotting and prose Fields so elegantly conjures."

— Kirkus

"Fields supplements the story with fascinating excerpts from Wharton's actual letters and includes appearances by other authors of the period . . . to re-create the exciting literary landscape of Paris and New York in the first decade of the 20th century. . . . the novel should . . . appeal to those who enjoyed Paula McLain's THE PARIS WIFE."

— *Library Journal*

"Delicate and imaginative . . . Fields's love and respect for all her characters and her care in telling their stories shines through."

— *Publishers Weekly*

"Inspired by Wharton's letters, THE AGE OF DESIRE is by turns sensuous . . . and sweetly melancholy. It's also a moving examination of a friendship between two women."

— Bookpage

"Fields bases her perceptive novel on Wharton's own diaries and letters. . . . [THE AGE OF DESIRE] sheds welcome light on the little-known private life of a famous woman and her closest relationships in early-twentieth-century Europe and America."

— Booklist

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Publication Date: August 2, 2012
Genres: Fiction, Historical Fiction
Hardcover: 368 pages
Publisher: Pamela Dorman Books
ISBN-10: 067002368X
ISBN-13: 9780670023684