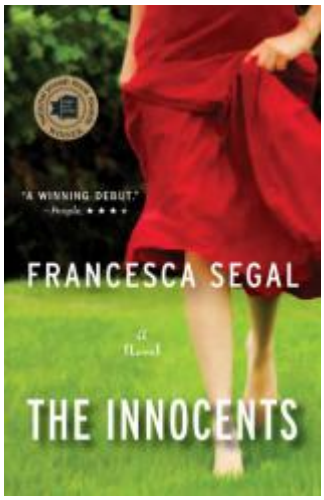
The Innocents

by Francesca Segal



About the Book

A smart and slyly funny tale of love, temptation, confusion and commitment; a triumphant and beautifully executed recasting of Edith Wharton's THE AGE OF INNOCENCE.

Newly engaged and unthinkingly self-satisfied, 28-year-old Adam Newman is the prize catch of Temple Fortune, a small, tight-knit Jewish suburb of London. He has been dating Rachel Gilbert since they were both 16 and now, to the relief and happiness of the entire Gilbert family, they are finally to marry. To Adam, Rachel embodies the highest values of Temple Fortune; she is innocent, conventional, and entirely secure in her community --- a place in which everyone still knows the whereabouts of their nursery school classmates. Marrying Rachel will cement Adam's role in a warm, inclusive family he loves.

But as the vast machinery of the wedding gathers momentum, Adam feels the first faint touches of claustrophobia, and when Rachel's younger cousin Ellie Schneider moves home from New York, she unsettles Adam more than he'd care to admit. Ellie --- beautiful, vulnerable and fiercely independent --- offers a liberation that he hadn't known existed: a freedom from the loving interference and frustrating parochialism of North West London. Adam finds himself questioning everything, suddenly torn between security and exhilaration, tradition and independence. What might he be missing by staying close to home?

Discussion Guide

1. Segal's debut novel is a re-telling of the classic novel *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE* by Edith Wharton. For those of you who have read the book or seen the movie adaptation of *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE*, discuss the specific ways in which *THE INNOCENTS* parallels Wharton's novel, and then consider the important ways in which it departs from her novel. Does knowledge of this parallel add to your understanding of Segal's novel, or does it complicate it?

2. Apart from Adam's initial physical attraction to Ellie, what in the beginning of the novel foreshadowed that Adam and Rachel were not, perhaps, as ideally suited to one another as he'd thought for the past 12 years?

3. How did the back-story about Jackie's death help you to sympathize with Ellie? What aspects of her personality seem most likely a result of her mother's early death and her father's subsequent emotional distance?

4. Discuss Ziva's relationship with Ellie and consider how the two women are similar in terms of being survivors. How much do you think this accounted for their mutual affection for one another? Could any of the others --- Jaffa, Rachel, Adam --- have truly understood Ziva? Why or why not?

5. Compare Ellie's character with that of Rachel's, and discuss Adam's inability to commit wholly to just one of them for most of the novel. Between the two women, whom did you prefer? With whom did you sympathize the most? Do you think Adam made the right choice, in the end?

6. Compare and contrast the novel's "Ethan Goodman" financial scandal with recent events in the financial sector of our own culture --- such as the Bernie Madoff scandal. Discuss how the ordeal operates as a catalyst and as a complication of the plot within the novel. Do you think it can also work as a symbol with any of Segal's themes in the book? Why or why not?

7. How well does Segal portray the social, psychological, religious and emotional lives of the Jewish community in North London? Do you feel that she conveys a reasonable and realistic portrait of this large and diverse group of people? What were her greatest strengths in her depiction, as well as her weaknesses?

8. Similarly, how did characters like Ziva Schneider help you to understand the Israeli immigrant experience? In particular, what did the novel help to show about the Jewish survivors of World War II, and their difficulties with nationality and assimilation into post-World War II European society?

9. Is Rachel's character a passive one? Would you call her passive aggressive? Why or why not? By the end of the novel, in what significant ways has her character changed?

10. Discuss how Segal incorporates the subject of death into her novel --- is her handling of the subject matter sensitive? Objective? Realistic? Consider the many moments in the novel where death is encountered or referenced and discuss Segal's success when it comes to writing about the end of life and its impact on those who remain.

11. Similarly, discuss Segal's choice of setting for this adaptation of Wharton's novel. In what important ways does the Jewish community of North London in the early 2000s parallel late 19th century New York? Discuss the key characteristics that these communities share, and then discuss their important differences.

12. Discuss the significance of Segal's title to the characters in her book. Not only does the title recall Wharton's novel, but it reflects a characteristic of the group of people she's writing about, as well as specific characters. Discuss the ways in which *THE INNOCENTS* is both a sincere title and an ironic one.

Author Bio

Francesca Segal was born in London in 1980. Brought up between the UK and America, she studied at Oxford and Harvard universities before becoming a writer. Her work has appeared in *Granta*, *The Guardian* and *The Jewish Chronicle*, amongst others. She has been a features writer at *Tatler*, and for three years wrote the Debut Fiction column in *The Observer*.

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