

# The Expat Book Club



## 'The Essex Serpent'

SARAH PERRY

### Discussion Guide

Our Expat Book Club first question is always the same: Did you finish the book...and did you enjoy it?

Sarah Perry's novel is set in the Victorian Age. Does it read like a Victorian novel to you (think Charles Dickens, Wilkie Collins...) or did it feel contemporary?

Cora's son, Francis, appears to be on the autistic spectrum (although this is never referred to). While autism may not have been understood during this era, Cora's anguish and concern about being a mother ring very true today. Would you agree? Garret advises her, 'There is no blood test for eccentricity, no objective measure for your love or his!' (p 52). Do you think 'eccentricity' was more readily accepted in the Victorian age than today?

The story is about the search for a monster, but it is at the beginning of the novel that Cora is freed from her monstrous husband Michael who had told her, 'I'll fill your wounds with gold'. What did he mean by this? Do you think that this has any relevance to Cora's character development?

The hunt for 'The Essex serpent' sees a clash between religion, superstition and science. How is this played out in the novel?

The serpent could be seen as a secondary storyline to the novel's central concerns- the developing passion and regard between Cora and Ransome, and Cora's own awakening. Would you agree?

What do you think the serpent symbolises? And does it mean different things to different people?

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'I've freed myself from the obligation to try and be beautiful. And I was never more happy.' Despite not trying to be beautiful Cora has a multitude of admirers. What did you think of Cora?

As the novel progresses it becomes more gothic in feel and the landscape plays a central role in heightening the dramatic tension. Did you enjoy the descriptions of place - the river, the marshes - in the book?

This is a novel with a lot of love triangles! Which relationship in the novel did you find the most compelling- and did things work out for the characters in the way you wanted it to?

One of the standout themes of the novel is that of friendship, and in particular relationships between men and women that do not involve subjugation. As readers we expect that at the end of the novel Cora will choose between two men, but in fact she doesn't. By thwarting the convention, is Sarah Perry showing us that true friendship is of equal value to romantic love?

This is a novel filled with ideas. Are there any that you felt were relevant today? Does this give the reader cause to reflect on the nature of history?

By describing Stella Ransome's illness from her own point of view, the author gives us an insight into how tuberculosis affects the mind. The passages about Stella were both moving and fascinating - would you agree?

The novel is interspersed throughout with letters from the different characters. How do letters impact the story? And why do you think the author decided to end the novel with a letter?