

# The Fig Eater

by Jody Shields

## A READING GROUP GUIDE

“When I set myself the task of bringing to light what human beings keep hidden within them, not by the compelling power of hypnosis, but by observing what they say and what they show, I thought the task was a harder one than it really is. He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore. And thus the task of making conscious the most hidden recesses of the mind is one which it is quite possible to accomplish.”

— Sigmund Freud in

*Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*

## Jody Shields on writing *The Fig Eater*

First there was Dora. Or Dora as a patient described by Sigmund Freud in his *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, published in 1905.

A teenager at the time of her analysis, Dora was the central character in this celebrated — and deeply criticized — case history, which was one of Freud's resounding failures. The analysis had started well. After his first session with Dora, Freud confidently wrote, "The case has opened smoothly to my collection of picklocks."

Inspired by this observation, I began to imagine Dora's sordid, tangled situation with her family as a mystery that the psychoanalyst would "solve."

I started writing *The Fig Eater* — and soon discovered that Dora was missing from the book. She had been murdered. Unintentionally, I had reversed Freud's case history, and the absent Dora was described by her family and friends.

*The Fig Eater* was also informed by other books that I discovered by happenstance: The memoirs of a governess who worked for Hungarian nobility. A book by an aristocratic British officer stationed in Vienna during the early 1900s. An account of a journey in Eastern Europe by two intrepid lady travelers. Baedeker Guides and Hungarian cookbooks. Gypsy histories. A photography book supplied visual information, from the surprising profusion of dogcarts on the streets of Vienna to the shape of the topiary trees in the city's gardens. The character of Erszébet, the Inspector's wife, was shaped by one of the few books available in English on contemporary Hungarian folklore, a fortuitous discovery.

A police manual written in 1904, *System der Kriminalistik*, was a random purchase at a flea market. The Inspector, one of the main characters in *The Fig Eater*, employed the investigative techniques detailed in this book. Some procedural information in *Kriminalistik* was completely contemporary; detectives were urged to rely on logic, order, and observation as their tools of investigation. Cutting-edge turn-of-the-century scientific techniques ranged from identifying bloodstains to reading finger-

prints and the footprints of one-legged criminals. The manual also featured information on many arcane topics, such as distinguishing the handwriting of a person in a hypnotic state, identifying scoundrel types from their cranial defects, and interpreting superstitious objects left at the scene of a crime.

*Kriminalistic* was written by Hans Gross, a noted Austrian judge and a professor of criminology. Gross is a fascinating and forgotten figure who should be properly recognized as the originator of modern psychological crime detection. His subtle detective techniques surpassed the exploits of his fictional contemporary, Sherlock Holmes. It is possible that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was acquainted with *Kriminalistik*, which was published around the same time that Dr. Holmes investigated his first case.

Strangely, everything came full circle: After I'd finished writing *The Fig Eater* I discovered that Freud had actually lectured to Professor Gross's students. And that Gross's son, Otto, had become one of Freud's disciples.

## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why is Erszébet so deeply interested in Dora's murder? What motivates her to undertake her own investigation?
2. How would you describe the relationship between Erszébet and Wally? What role does each play in the other's life?
3. How does Erszébet's approach to crime-solving differ from the Inspector's? To what do you attribute these differences?
4. Consider the many different ways voyeurism is present in the novel.
5. Whom did you suspect of being Dora's killer? Did your suspicions change at various points in the novel?
6. The real Dora, Freud's patient, was seduced by her father's friend Herr K. In *The Fig Eater* Dora is a victim not just of seduction but of murder. Why do you think Jody Shields chose — in a novel that explores women's psychology and sexuality — to escalate the crime in this way?
7. Are the rules of criminal investigation stated in the *System der Kriminalistik* still relevant? Do today's criminal investigators follow them? Which rules struck you as particularly crucial to Dora's case?
8. Erszébet and the Inspector's marriage has many ups and downs. Discuss the fluctuations in their marriage in relation to their separate investigations of the murder. When are Erszébet and the Inspector emotionally close? When are they distant?
9. Fire is a constant element in the novel. What does it signify?

10. What is the role of food in *The Fig Eater*, particularly as it figures in the characters' relationships? What about hunger?
11. In what ways is sexuality constrained in the characters' lives? How does the repression of sexuality manifest itself?
12. Consider the various ways in which the notion of duality is explored in *The Fig Eater*: the parallel investigations, rational versus mystical, truth versus lies, bourgeois propriety versus sexuality. How does Shields play these off each other?
13. Discuss the significance of Erszébet's research into the history of the edible fig. How did your knowledge (from the novel's title) of the fig's importance to the story affect your reading?
14. Discuss how photographs and photography figure in the novel. What role does Egon play? What powers does he attribute to photographs?
15. What is the significance of the novel's setting: early-twentieth-century Vienna? Think about the mixing of old and new worlds, and the introduction of new ways of thinking.
16. Whom would you cast in the film adaptation of *The Fig Eater*?

## Jody Shields's suggestions for further reading

Of the numerous near-contemporary accounts of life in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Vienna, the most interesting are Arthur Schnitzler's *La Ronde*, Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities*, and Stefan Zweig's *The World of Yesterday*. Additional background material can be found in Frederic Morton's *A Nervous Splendor* and Jacques Le Rider's *Modernity and Crises of Identity: Culture and Society in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*.

Notable selections from the vast amount of literature concerning Dora and early psychoanalysis include Hannah S. Decker's *Freud, Dora, and Vienna 1900*; Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane's *In Dora's Case: Freud — Hysteria — Feminism*; Hanns Sachs's *Freud, Master and Friend*; and Patrick J. Mahony's *Freud's Dora: A Psychoanalytic, Historical, and Textual Study*; as well as, of course, the original case history, Sigmund Freud's *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*.

Recommended works of psychological interest include Michel Foucault's *The Care of the Self*, volume three of *The History of Sexuality*; Mark Epstein's *Thoughts without a Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective*; and Sabine Baring-Gould's *The Book of Werewolves: Being an Account of Terrible Superstition*.

NEW FICTION IN PAPERBACK • GREAT FOR READING GROUPS

*River, Cross My Heart*

by Breena Clarke

“A genuine masterpiece . . . full of grace and beauty and profound insights . . . It bears traces of Eudora Welty’s charm and Toni Morrison’s passion.” — Michael Shelden, *Baltimore Sun*

“A sweet read . . . sweet like homemade ice cream from a hand-cranked machine, and just as rich.”

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*The Archivist*

by Martha Cooley

“A literary detective story . . . beautifully paced and gripping . . . An impressive debut.” — Christina Patterson, *The Observer*

“Engrossing . . . Rarely has a novel centering on the life of the mind felt so passionate.”

— Megan Harlan, *Entertainment Weekly*

*Talking to the Dead*

by Helen Dunmore

“Gripping and complex . . . a moral whodunit.”

— Carol Kino, *New York Times Book Review*

“Dunmore takes a tale that could drive a thriller and weaves her linguistic spell around it. The result is brilliant and terrifying, an unbeatable combination.”

— Carolyn Banks, *Washington Post*



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*Jim the Boy*  
by Tony Earley

“Rich and satisfying. . . . A novel that perfectly captures the innocence and confusion and wonder of childhood.”

— John Gregory Brown, *Chicago Tribune*

“This modest little masterpiece of a book may make you feel like flying.”

— Mary Ann Gwinn, *Seattle Times*

*White Oleander*  
by Janet Fitch

“A ferocious, risk-loving novel. . . intimate and epic.”

— Mark Rozzo, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*

“Quite simply, *White Oleander* is amazing. It’s the kind of book you don’t want to put down. It’s full-blooded, alive, breathtaking, frightening. . . . This incredible novel is the story of what it is to be extraordinary women.”

— Rohana Chomick, *Tampa Tribune–Times*

*The Power of the Dog*  
by Thomas Savage

“A gripping and tense novel. . . . A work of literary art.”

— Annie Proulx, in her afterword to *The Power of the Dog*

“Mr. Savage is a writer of the first order, and he possesses in abundance the novelist’s highest art — the ability to illuminate and move.”

— *The New Yorker*



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*Make Believe*

by Joanna Scott

“Elegant, rich, and completely spellbinding.”

— Deborah Sussman Susser, *Washington Post Book World*

“Wonderful. . . . There are things in *Make Believe* that take the breath away. . . . One cannot help urging anyone who loves writing to read this book.” — Nick Hornby, *New York Times Book Review*

*Fortune’s Rocks*

by Anita Shreve

“*Fortune’s Rocks* kept me reading long into the night. . . . Shreve renders an adolescent girl’s plunge into disastrous passion with excruciating precision and acuteness.”

— Katherine A. Powers, *Boston Globe*

“A breathtaking, highly entertaining novel . . . richly rewarding.”

— Robert Allen Papinchak, *USA Today*

*Evening News*

by Marly Swick

“An affecting novel . . . utterly palpable and real. . . . It possesses both the psychological suspense of Sue Miller’s bestselling *The Good Mother* and the emotional acuity of Alice Munro’s short stories.”

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