

## Book Club Discussion Guide



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# Study for Obedience

By Sarah Bernstein

## About the author:

Sarah Bernstein is a Canadian writer and scholar who was born in Montreal and now lives in the Scottish Highlands, where she teaches literature and creative writing. In 2015, she published *Now Comes the Lightning*, an acclaimed collection of prose poems. *Study for Obedience*, shortlisted for the Booker Prize 2023, is Bernstein's second novel. Her debut, *The Coming Bad Days*, was published in 2021. Her fiction, poetry and essays have appeared in publications such as *Contemporary Women's Writing*, *MAP* magazine, *Granta* and *ROOM Magazine*. In 2023, she was named by *Granta* as one of the best young writers in Britain.

Source: <https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/authors/sarah-bernstein>

## About this book:

A young woman moves from the place of her birth to the remote northern country of her forebears to be housekeeper to her brother, whose wife has recently left him.

Soon after her arrival, a series of inexplicable events occurs - collective bovine hysteria; the demise of an ewe and her nearly born lamb; a local dog's phantom pregnancy; a potato blight. She notices that the local suspicion about incomers in general seems to be directed with some intensity at her and she senses a mounting threat that lies 'just beyond the garden gate.' And as she feels the hostility growing, pressing at the edges of her brother's

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property, she fears that, should the rumblings in the town gather themselves into a more defined shape, who knows what might happen, what one might be capable of doing.

With a sharp, lyrical voice, Sarah Bernstein powerfully explores questions of complicity and power, displacement and inheritance. *Study for Obedience* is a finely tuned, unsettling novel that confirms Bernstein as one of the most exciting voices of her generation.

Source: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.ca/books/735880/study-for-obedience-by-sarah-bernstein/9781039009066>

### Discussion Questions:

1..The novel's location is never revealed, other than being described by the narrator as a 'remote northern country'. In your reading of the book, did you have a real country in mind, and if so which one? Why do you think the author chose to leave the setting nameless and open to interpretation?

2..The book contains several 21st-century references, such as social media and Microsoft Teams, yet the setting and mood feel almost 19th century. Did you feel that you were reading a modern novel, a historical work, or a book with a time and space all of its own?

3..One of the book's epigraphs is a quote from the artist Paula Rego: 'I can turn the tables and do as I want. I can make women stronger. I can make them obedient and murderous at the same time.' How do you think this quote relates to the narrator? Clearly, she is obedient, but is she also capable of powerful and deadly acts?

4..On the one hand, the narrator is the book's victim; persecuted on an individual level by her own family, and (although not made explicitly clear) as a Jewish woman by society at large and carrying the burden of the past. But to what extent is she also the book's villain? Is there an interpretation of the book in which she is almost a witch or demon, cursing the

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villagers and slowly killing her brother, without being fully aware of her own destructive power?

5..At one point, the narrator discovers a strange mark carved into a wooden post outside her brother's home. 'It was not from an alphabet familiar to me, certainly not Latin or Greek; not Cyrillic, Hebrew or Arabic, none of these, no.' Yet because of the other clues in the book, we might interpret the mark as something anti-semitic. The Booker judges said: 'The author never uses the words "swastika", but the reader understands this implicitly, and it's chilling.' Did you imagine the mark to be a swastika? What else might it be?

6..While both the narrator and her brother are Jewish, only she faces hostility from the local community, while he is embraced warmly and integrated into village life, suggesting there is something about her as an individual that repulses them, rather than her Jewishness alone. What do you think it is?

7..In the Guardian, Chris Power writes: 'Reading a book in which details are so vaporous seeds interpretative doubt: might the fact the story's setting doesn't match any real-world country, and that the locals the narrator interacts so uneasily with remain ciphers, mean it should be read as a fable?' Would you agree that the book has, in Power's words, 'a fable-like energy' and if so how does that affect your interpretation of the events in the book?

8..Natural events - a dog with a phantom pregnancy, cows gone mad, piglets killed by their own mother - take on a deeper, darker significance in the book and lend it an air of folk horror. To what extent did you read the book as a horror story?

9..The book contains over a dozen references to other works of literature; passages which allude to writing by, among others, Virginia Woolf, Walt Whitman, Susan Sontag and Penelope Fitzgerald. Were you aware of any of these references while reading the novel, and why do you think the author decided to list them at the end of the novel?

10..Some critics have taken issue with the book's lack of plot or story. Few things of significance happen, and those that do are open to interpretation because the narrator's

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account is either unreliable or lacking essential detail. Did you feel this was a book with little or no plot, and can a book with almost no plot still be great?

Source: The Booker Prizes <https://thebookerprizes.com/the-booker-library/features/reading-guide-study-for-obedience-by-sarah-bernstein>