

Simon and Schuster Reading Guide for THE DEATH OF MRS. WESTAWAY

*This readers group guide for **The Death of Mrs. Westaway** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author **Ruth Ware**. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

Introduction

Twenty-one-year-old Hal has been down on her luck since her mother's death two years ago. With a loan shark and his cronies beating on her door and physically threatening her, Hal is struggling to eke out a living at the tarot-reading booth she took over from her mother on Brighton's West Pier.

But on a day that begins like any other, Hal receives a glimmer of hope in the form of a mysterious letter bequeathing her a substantial inheritance. She realizes very quickly that the letter was sent to the wrong person—but that the cold-reading skills she's honed as a tarot reader might help her claim the money anyway.

Soon, Hal finds herself at the funeral of the deceased . . . where it dawns on her that there is something very, very wrong about this strange situation and the inheritance at the center of it.

Topics and Questions for Discussion

1. Hal learned tarot, her eventual trade as an adult, from her mother at a young age. What else did Hal inherit from her mother? How does Hal's understanding of her inheritance, physical and otherwise, change over the course of the novel?
2. How does the unknown identity of the writer of the diaries from Trepassen affect your understanding of the events? Did you guess at the identity before it was revealed?
3. How does the solicitor, Mr. Treswick, change the outcome for Hal and the Westaway family? Did he do his due diligence in finding and vetting Hal? Do you think Hal is glad to have been found, in the end?
4. How did you react to Hal's ultimate decision to attend the funeral? What do you think her true motivation was? What would you have done in her shoes?
5. Hal is skilled at stepping into different roles—she plays Madame Margarida for her clients, she plays the regretful granddaughter for the funeral. What does this skill say about Hal's character?
6. The interplay of skepticism and superstition is as present throughout *The Death of*

Mrs. Westaway as the swarms of magpies at Trepassen. How does this tug-of-war between skepticism and superstition affect each of the characters? Would things have turned out differently if Hal believed in fortunes and fate?

7. “You should never have come back here,” Mrs. Warren attempts to warn Hal (p. 219). Can Hal trust Mrs. Warren? Can she trust Mitzi, or any of the other Westaways? Why or why not?

8. Hal plays the mouse, but feels she is more the rat. Which is she really? How do the events at Trepassen change Hal’s understanding of herself and her own identity?

9. Who is the real villain of *The Death of Mrs. Westaway*? Why? Does that change throughout the course of the book?

10. The house at Trepassen, cavernous and cold and rundown, almost takes on a life of its own. How much of that was due to the mark Mrs. Westaway left on the house? What sort of home environment did Mrs. Westaway create for her children? How does Mrs. Warren perpetuate that?

11. Abel, Harding, Ezra—and even Mrs. Warren—swear that Ezra was the favorite. How does that fact play out in the end? Was Mrs. Westaway protecting Ezra?

12. Were you surprised by the revelation between Ezra and Hal, or by the final revelation Hal discovers in the study and Mrs. Warren’s wing? Why or why not?

13. Does Hal get what she deserves in the end? What does she gain? What does she learn? At what cost?

14. What do you think Mrs. Westaway’s motive was in leaving her will as she did? How much do you think she knew about Hal before her death? Why or why not?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Author A. J. Finn said, “*The Death of Mrs. Westaway*, [Ruth Ware’s] latest, is also her best.” If you haven’t read Ware’s other novels, go back and read *In a Dark, Dark Wood*, *The Woman in Cabin 10*, or *The Lying Game* and discuss with your book club. Which book is your favorite? How are they similar and different from one another?

2. Explore the world of tarot and fortune reading. Find a local tarot reader for a visit with your book club, or learn the basics online from Tarot.com or this article on Vogue.com: <https://www.vogue.com/article/tarot-101-beginner-guide-how-to-small-spells>. You might even find a book on tarot reading at your local library or bookstore.

3. The expansive and dilapidated house at Trepassen, the colorful cast of characters, and the page-turning suspense of *The Death of Mrs. Westaway* seem like a perfect fit for the big screen. Who would you cast as Hal in the film version? What about Ezra,

Abel, Harding, and Mrs. Warren? Discuss with your book club.

4. Learn more about Ruth Ware by visiting her website at <http://www.ruthware.com>, or following her on [Twitter](#) @RuthWareWriter or at [Facebook.com/RuthWareWriter](https://www.facebook.com/RuthWareWriter).

A Conversation with Ruth Ware

***The Death of Mrs. Westaway* has it all: family secrets, an old Gothic manor, thrilling plot lines, page-turning pacing, flawed characters in a deeply human way. What was the genesis for this book? Did you start with a specific character, scene, or idea?**

I think the core of this book was the fact that I had written three novels about people who were drawn into crimes or deceptions through no fault of their own—they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time, or witnessed something they shouldn't have. With *The Death of Mrs. Westaway*, I wanted to try something quite different and write a character who sets out to commit a crime. Because I knew that I wanted Hal to be a con artist, I decided to give her a career suited to deceiving people—so I made her a tarot reader, but a cynical one who doesn't believe in the power of the cards but instead uses her skills and intuition to claim a knowledge she doesn't have.

The expansive estate and grand manor house at Trepassen, even in their disrepair, are quite impressive, and crucial to the story line. Is Trepassen based on a real place?

Not exactly—it's very loosely based on a real house in Sussex, near where I live, called Standen House, which is a very beautiful arts and crafts house. Standen House is in much better repair than Trepassen, although largely unaltered since the 1930s, but it has a slightly haunted, melancholy air, as it was built for a large, loving family of seven children, who gradually all died or moved away, leaving the house in the custody of the youngest daughter, who had not married. She left it to the National Trust in her will and it's now open to the public, still furnished with the family's possessions, as if they had simply popped out for a country walk one day.

The long tiled corridors, the echoing rooms, and the orangery at Trepassen are all inspired by counterparts at Standen, and walking around the place I couldn't help but imagine what it must have been like to be the one remaining sibling living there alone, growing older and frailer, with the house falling into disrepair around her.

But the Cornish setting owes a heavy debt to the novels of Daphne du Maurier—there is definitely a large pinch of Manderley in the mix.

The sibling—and pseudo-sibling, in the case of Maud and Maggie—dynamics greatly affect the events of the novel. Were you inspired by any real-life siblings or relationships?

It's funny because out of all the siblings in the book, I think the closest sibling relationship is Maggie and Maud, who as you mentioned aren't really sisters at all. But I am very close to my sister and I definitely relate to the unconditional loyalty that Maggie and Maud develop for each other.

I have no idea where the brothers came from, though—they feel very real to me, and I love their complicated mix of affection and exasperation for one another, but I've no idea what inspired that. Sometimes my imagination is a mystery even to me.

What kind of research did you do for this book? Did you already have experience with tarot, or is that something you researched specifically?

Believe it or not, I knew almost nothing about tarot and had never had a reading, though I have always loved the look of the cards and been a little fascinated by their imagery. It was really fun researching all that—I bought books about tarot reading and symbolism and had great fun picking and choosing how all the readings in the book would pan out. But of course, as I mentioned, Hal is a cynical tarot reader who doesn't actually believe the cards have any mystical power and uses her powers of observation for slightly less-than-moral ends, so the other strand of research I did was into fake mediums and psychics, which was equally fascinating. I read about "cold reading" techniques, where the so-called psychic genuinely knows nothing beforehand about their mark but simply picks up information from their reactions and appearance, and "hot reading," where the person conducting the reading researches their mark beforehand to give the appearance of insight. I also went and had a tarot reading myself—I did this after conducting all my research so it was fascinating to see some of the things I had researched play out in the reading.

I also picked up some truly horrifying stories of people taken in by fake psychics. They were told to me in confidence so I probably can't share them here—but suffice it to say, I would be very, *very* careful if anyone contacts you out of the blue.

Mrs. Westaway herself is a bit of a shadowy figure. We only get to know her through the stories and recollections of others, and fleeting mentions in Maggie's diary. Why did you choose to keep her mostly off the page?

Partly it was practicality—the story is about Hal's journey of discovery, not Maggie's experiences at Trepassen, so I didn't want to include too much from the diary, and that meant limiting the scenes with Mrs. Westaway. Also many of the climactic scenes that I would have liked to feature were impossible to include in the diary. But partly I loved the idea of a character like Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca, who is a hugely looming, influential presence in the novel but who we only see through the recollection of others. I really enjoy books where a pivotal character exists mainly off the page, and we see different, disorted flickers through the lens of different observers.

Like in *The Lying Game*, the narrative in *The Death of Mrs. Westaway* alternates Hal's story in the present day and the diary entries from that fateful year—1994—

at Trepassen. What draws you to weave the past into the present? What does this allow you to do with the narrative?

Hmm . . . I don't know, this is a good question! I guess one answer is that unlike some crime writers, I'm not actually very interested in the crime itself—the gun, the body, the poison, or whatever. What matters to me is not so much the pebble that is thrown into the pond but the ripples that emanate from that pebble and the effect they have on other people. I suppose by putting the crime in the past, it enables the effect of those ripples to be more pronounced and allows me to concentrate on that part of the narrative.

I also love writing about secrets—and the thing about secrets is that the longer you keep them, the bigger they become.

How was writing *The Death of Mrs. Westaway* different from writing *In a Dark, Dark Wood*, *The Woman in Cabin 10*, and *The Lying Game*? How has your writing evolved with each book?

I'm not honestly sure, is the answer! This is probably something that the writer is worst-placed to comment on, because we are too close to the picture to see. I think *The Death of Mrs. Westaway* is probably darker and more gothic than my earlier books, which are a bit more fast-paced and action-packed. But the theme of female friendship and loyalty is a constant.

***The Death of Mrs. Westaway* is chock-full of plot twists and turns and red herrings that keep the reader guessing until the very end—do you outline your books to keep that all straight, or does it come to you as you go? How do you organize the plot for your novels?**

I generally don't outline—or not very much. I have an idea of the structure in my head and sometimes if my editors ask me to I will jot that down, but it's not usually very extensive—a page or two at most. I also have a couple of paragraphs of notes at the end of the manuscript with jotted-down notes for things that I think should happen, or stuff that I need to go back and fix (or in the case of *Mrs. Westaway*, dates of birth and relative ages of all the characters, since that was important to the plot), but in general I hold 90 percent of the book in my head. I am always in awe of writers who have complicated charts with time lines and Post-it notes and index cards. I feel like I'm winging it most of the time!

It must be exhausting to publish a new book every year! How do you stay balanced with your writing and touring schedule? Do you take any time off between books, or is it right back to the grindstone?

I usually jump right back in—as soon as I finish one book, I begin the next (often the very next day). Not so much out of a sense of duty, although I do have contracts and deadlines I need to meet, but more because I always get a sense of huge deflation when a book comes out, and I find the best way to combat that is having another one on

the boil all ready to go. That said, this book is the first time I didn't do that. I was traveling and touring so much that it was all I could do to complete the edits on *Mrs. Westaway*; I just didn't have time to begin a new book. Mostly though, the two fit pretty well together—I get long stretches of time when I can hunker down in my writing cave (it's not a cave, I should probably make that clear) and then I get to break for fresh air and remember why I do it all.

You've mentioned in past interviews that you are a fan of Agatha Christie novels. What else do you like to read? Do you read other novels while working on your own?

I love Christie, but actually the biggest influence on this book were two other writers: Daphne du Maurier (who I've already mentioned) and Josephine Tey—anyone who has read her novel *Brat Farrar* will probably see some common themes and elements with *The Death of Mrs. Westaway*. Plus Hal is no Tom Ripley, but I was definitely thinking about Patricia Highsmith's mesmerising con-man antihero when I was coming up with her character.

I love to read anything and everything, and I do read while working on my own books, but I find I can't read crime or psychological thrillers, at least not while I'm in the early stages of the idea. It's partly to do with finding the voice of my character—I have to learn to be silent for a little while, to listen to what my narrator is trying to say to me, and it's hard to do that while you're immersed in someone else's character. But it's also a practical issue—if I'm already committed to a story, I don't want to find out that someone else is writing on the same subject or has used the same twist. If I'm halfway through the book it's too late to turn back, so I would rather simply not know! For that reason, you'll often find me re-reading old favorites that I know backward already, or wallowing in nonfiction or comedy or something completely unrelated. I just finished a volume of David Sedaris's essays, which is basically a perfect counterpart to writing crime.

All reading guide content copyright Simon and Schuster Inc. Click [here](#) to visit the Simon and Schuster page for Ruth or [here](#) to return to the main site.