

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
THE LOST APOTHECARY

THE  
LONDON  
SÉANCE  
SOCIETY

A Novel



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# Discussion Guide

## BOOK GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. **THE LONDON SÉANCE SOCIETY** opens with Lenna's point of view, and we immediately learn she's a skeptic who doesn't entirely believe in ghosts. She says, "It wasn't that she didn't believe; she simply couldn't be sure." Do you consider yourself a skeptic or a believer in ghosts? If you're a skeptic, would you be willing to try a séance to contact a loved one, as Lenna does? Or, if you believe in ghosts, have you ever had a personal experience with the paranormal?
2. As the story begins, we learn two people have been murdered. And yet, there is a relatively small cast of characters. As the story progressed, did you believe you'd figured out the "whodunit"? Who did you suspect along the way?
3. As the story unfolds, Vaudeline acts as mentor and guide to Lenna, teaching her the art of mediumship. But at various turns in the story, their roles reverse, and Lenna is the one opening Vaudeline's eyes to different ways of thinking. What are a few of the ways the women helped each other with self-discovery and growth?
4. The author chose a different point of view for the two narrating characters in the story. Lenna's point of view is told in the third person, whereas Morley narrates in the first person. Why might the author have chosen these different points of view?
5. Who was your favorite character—dead or alive—in the book, and why?
6. In the mystery genre, authors often insert "red herrings"—plot devices meant to mislead a reader and prolong the story's suspense. What "red herrings" did you encounter in this story?
7. Victorian London was strait-laced and repressive, especially for women. How do you think you would have fared in such a society? Would you have rebelled against the rules, as Lenna found herself doing, or would you have been a rule-follower?
8. At the end of the story, Vaudeline and Lenna are to embark on an international tour. What else do you think their future holds?
9. Have you read the author's debut, *THE LOST APOTHECARY*? If so, discuss the ways in which **THE LONDON SÉANCE SOCIETY** is different, and also how the books are similar. Which book did you like better?
10. Have you ever attended a séance? If so, did anything unusual or strange occur?
11. What's your favorite ghost story, or your favorite book in the paranormal genre?
12. **THE LONDON SÉANCE SOCIETY** reveals a number of common ruses and tricks historically used in séances. Which of the ruses or tricks did you find most interesting?



## Behind *The London Séance Society*: A Real-Life Séance

It's midsummer 2021 in rural central Florida, and I've just arrived at the Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp, established more than a century ago. The "Camp" is little more than a tiny, unincorporated community consisting of a handful of buildings, including an old—and reportedly haunted—hotel.

As I pull into town, a few people mill about on the streets. It's easy to distinguish the tourists, like me, from those who live and work at the Camp—the psychics and mediums, the spiritualists, the ghost-hunters.

I have a small brown notebook tucked into my purse and a pen at the ready. I'll be here for the next two nights, and I'm eager to get to work. This is a research trip, after all: I'm in the middle of drafting my sophomore novel, *The London Séance Society*, and I'll be damned if I don't partake in a real-life séance as part of this project.

I'm not here alone. I'm accompanied by my mom, with whom I'm very close. I've advised her not to share our whereabouts on social media; this book hasn't yet been announced, and I'm keeping the subject matter close for now. In this way, our trip feels secretive, like we're two girls up to no good. As we unload our car at our bed-and-breakfast, the oak trees around us stretch tall into the sky, their branches dripping with Spanish moss. It's an eerie scene, even in daylight. The humidity is oppressive. The cicadas are deafening. All of it is so quintessentially Southern.

My mom, a fervent believer in the spirit world, is the ideal companion for this trip. She can recount numerous personal encounters with ghosts and spirits. She and Vaudeline D'Allaire, the esteemed spiritualist in *The London Séance Society*, would be very good friends, I'm sure.

As for me? I'm more like Lenna Wickes, the skeptical protagonist of the story. As I write in the early chapters, "It wasn't that she didn't believe; she simply couldn't be sure." Arriving at Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp, this is precisely how I feel. I want to believe. I want to experience something during this trip.

I want to leave here indisputably convinced that ghosts are real.

My mom and I have quite a busy itinerary over the next two days. We'll reside in separate rooms at the historic Ann Stevens House, a Victorian dwelling converted into a bed-and-breakfast. Tonight, our first evening at the Camp, we'll partake in a nighttime "Beyond the Veil" tour, in which we'll use cameras, audio recorders, and electromagnetic field detectors to—hopefully—catch some sign of spirit activity.


Tomorrow is an even bigger day. We'll embark on a guided tour of the Camp, and then my mom and I will each have a private reading performed by one of the dozens of mediums who live here. Afterward, we'll meander through the local graveyard, stopping to appreciate the faded headstones, many of which date back to the 1800s.

The big event—the séance—will be tomorrow night. It's the "grand finale" of this trip, and it's safe to say I'm nervous about the event.

Nervous and very, very curious.

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The next evening, my mom and I arrive early at the séance. I use the time to review the notes I've made in my journal over the preceding thirty-six hours.



In truth, this Camp visit has been somewhat...anticlimactic. Nothing yet has convinced me that the spirit world is real. Last night's "Beyond the Veil" tour, for instance: I caught an "orb" with my smartphone camera, which delighted the guide and a few of the tourists, but a quick Google search said it was probably nothing more than a speck of dust on the lens.

My mom, however, disagreed: she was convinced the orb was a ghost. "If it was only a speck of dust on the lens," she asked, "why didn't it show up on all of your photos? Why just the one?"

Fair question, I admit. These are precisely the sort of truth-versus-illusion questions I want to weave into my book.

But my private reading with the medium wasn't too convincing, either. Her statements were vague, sometimes completely off-base. My mom, on the other hand, left her reading impressed—even somewhat emotional. The same medium posed topics and questions that were, for my mom, spot-on.

I begin to wonder if the problem might be me, and the question further informs my book. *Maybe my resistance is part of the problem*, Lenna eventually muses to herself in the story. *How can anything of the spirit world show itself to me if I simply write it off as illusion?*

Still, I know that if I'm to leave the Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp a believer in ghosts, tonight's séance will need to be extraordinary.

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Several other people arrive for the séance. It's seven o'clock in the evening, and we're in the living room of an old Victorian house. The curtains have been drawn shut, and a single light bulb is draped in red fabric, giving the low-lit room a sensual, even erotic, glow. I'm officially feeling spooked.

The séance is smaller than I expected: there are six of us in total, including the medium leading the event. We sit in a circle, and the medium begins with a protective prayer—which ultimately inspires the *Ancient Devil's Incantation* in my book, the first stage of the seven-stage séance sequence.

After this prayer, the medium walks us through a guided meditation. We close our eyes, and the medium creates an imaginary setting for us to mentally walk through. I'm not new to meditation, so this is actually quite a relaxing, familiar experience for me. For the next half hour, we're asked to imagine a variety of things: an animal, a conversation with someone, a crystal in our palm.

The meditation concludes, and we all open our eyes. I notice immediately that the two people across the circle from me are quite emotional. They hold hands, both clutching tissues.


The medium asks us to go around the circle and share what we gleaned from the meditation—messages for ourselves and others around the room. Because I'm sitting at the medium's immediate left, I'm asked to go first. I freeze, suddenly terrified. I didn't realize I would need to actively participate in this part of the séance; I thought I could get away with simply observing.

And let's not forget, I'm a skeptic. So far, this experience has not been much different than meditating with my Headspace app. Now I can feel my face flushing.

With the medium's shrewd eye on me, I make a few vague comments, all but avoiding the "assignment." The medium seems somewhat disappointed, but I simply don't have much to offer. I then motion to my mom, indicating it's her turn. I feel as though I've let the room down.

The others in the room have had a much different experience than me. Four of the six total participants eventually begin to cry, my mom included. The others were able to extract relevant and meaningful





messages from their meditations. The medium shares a few of the messages he interpreted for my mom, and I'll admit, even *I* am surprised: the medium comments on my mom's long-standing love of horses and the first initial of the uncle she's always considered her guardian angel.

As we work our way around the circle, I eventually learn why the couple across the room is so emotional: they recently lost their infant grandchild, and they attended tonight's séance to, hopefully, receive a comforting message from their grandchild's spirit.

The most heart-wrenching part? Both of them believe they *did* receive a message; both feel more at peace now than they did upon walking into the room.

As they share this information, I find myself—for the first time tonight—fighting back tears of my own. Their story is heartbreaking, and it underscores a message I know I must work into my book: whether or not we believe in ghosts, we all seek connection with those we have lost.

This is the crux of it, I realize. Maybe this evening isn't about spirits at all. Maybe, instead, this desire to connect with the spirit world is about something as simple as *comfort*. Meaning. Peace.

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When our small party leaves the séance room, we wish each other well and say good-night. It's after nine o'clock, pitch-black outside. I'm anxious to return to my room at the bed-and-breakfast and journal about tonight's experience, which has been eye-opening in its own way. I realize that, upon arriving at the Camp, my objectives were all wrong. I'd sought proof of ghosts or lack thereof. I'd tasked this research trip—the séance, especially—with establishing tangible evidence that ghosts were real.

But the world of spirits isn't about proof, or evidence, at all—and truth is not a palette of black and white. Truth is not always tangible. And even if it was, I remind myself of the tears I saw shed this weekend: my mom's, and those of the couple across the séance room. Tears are tangible, aren't they?

Suddenly, I find myself energized and inspired. I have a book to finish writing, and this research trip has been vastly helpful, albeit not in the way I'd expected. I'm not leaving Cassadaga with a slew of ghostly evidence or apparitions caught on photo. Instead, I'm leaving with something even better: the reminder that, as Lenna states at the end of *The London Séance Society*, “the palpable could coexist with the invisible.”

So much can coexist, after all: differing beliefs, varying experiences. If only we could apply this same lesson to politics, religion, sexuality. If only we could honor and respect another's right to believe what they want. If only we could seek our commonalities and not focus so much on our differences.

Walking out of the séance, I keep my head down, somewhat embarrassed at my lackluster contributions during the séance. Moments ago, I thought I'd been the only one who hadn't had a meaningful experience.

Now, I smile to myself. How very wrong I was.

*Sarah Penner*