



Colorado Book Club Resource

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR OBSESSIVE GENIUS : THE INNER WORLD OF MARIE CURIE, BY BARBARA GOLDSMITH

1. Her own illness and those of her family defined Marie Curie's life. In what way can you point to her scientific drive as a way to cope with the repercussions of illness? How did Marie's own bipolar illness affect her career?
2. As the young Polish Manyá, how did Marie's distant relationship with her mother shape her personality? To what extent did Marie, as a mother, pattern herself after her own mother?
3. How did the inherent contradiction of Marie Curie's childhood—growing up Polish under a repressive Russian tsar—play itself out throughout Marie's adult life? How, in some ways, did this early schism help her control her emotions?
4. Marie Curie's achievements are astonishing and her success as a female scientist in a sexist scientific climate is a further tribute to her character and conviction. How has the mythology of Marie's life, and the misattribution of her merits (she is better remembered for the discovery of radium than for the inroads she made into radioactivity and atomic science), eroded the impact of her work? How did Marie's partnership with her husband enable her to make a great discovery? How did this partnership affect her standing as a scientist? Reviewing Marie's insatiable desire for knowledge, would she, in your opinion, have succeeded in her discoveries, with or without Pierre?
5. Marie planned to return to Poland upon finishing her degree at the Sorbonne, but she remained in France for the rest of her life. Do you think she would have left Warsaw for Paris, knowing this? What effect did her decision to remain in France have on her patriotism?
6. A week before his death, Wladyslaw Sklodowski wrote to his daughter, then Marie Curie, about her success at isolating radium. "What a pity it is that this work has only theoretical interest." How do you understand his remark?
7. In contrast to her unwavering sensibility as a scientist, Marie Curie's ability to judge amorous relationships proved somewhat impaired: twice she suffered the debilitating effects of unrealistic love affairs. Discuss this fundamental lack in her understanding of the mores of society.
8. Marie Curie's relationship with her daughters was complex. Her relationship with her younger daughter, Eve, took years to fully develop. Was Marie's treatment of Eve understandable? In what ways do you think Marie was insensitive to Eve's differences? Was she helpful or hurtful to her older daughter, Irene?



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9. What do you think of Eve Curie's description of her mother, after the death of Pierre Curie, as "a pitiful and incurably lonely woman"? How would you describe Marie's communication with Pierre even after his death? How did her loyalty to his memory influence her later work?
10. As the winner of two Nobel Prizes, did Marie Curie effectively secure the future of women in science?
11. Marie Curie seemed oblivious to the dangers of working with radium. Barbara Goldsmith attributes her denial of the dangers of the substance to "love." How else might you explain Marie's denial?
12. When the author visited Helene Langevin-Joliot, the granddaughter of Marie Curie, Helene, asked her, "Haven't we [Curies] all had wonderful lives?" Discuss this statement with regard to what we know of Marie, her daughters, and her granddaughter.
13. Did Marie realize the full implications of radioactivity (a word she coined)? When Irene said she was glad her mother died before the advent of the atomic bomb, what did she mean by this statement?

Questions issued by the publisher.



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