



STUTT GART BOOK CLUB READING GUIDE

White Oleander by Janet Fitch

About This Book

Everywhere hailed as a novel of rare beauty and power, *White Oleander* tells the unforgettable story of Ingrid, a brilliant poet imprisoned for murder, and her daughter, Astrid, whose odyssey through a series of Los Angeles foster homes - each its own universe, with its own laws, its own dangers, its own hard lessons to be learned--becomes a redeeming and surprising journey of self-discovery.

Discussion Questions

[Click here to go to the Virago Discussion Questions for White Oleander!](#)

1. Describe the relationship between Astrid and Ingrid early in the book. Why was Astrid fearful that her mother would "fly away" if she mentioned her desires - such as having a father, or going to summer camp or a YMCA program?
 2. Astrid chooses to express herself through painting and drawing, rather than through writing. Why do you think Astrid preferred these forms of creative expression? Which do you prefer?
 3. Compare the characteristics of the white oleander to those of Ingrid. Do the same with Astrid.
 4. Ingrid said, "Isn't it funny. I'm enjoying my hatred so much more than I ever enjoyed love" (p. 34). How did this statement come back to haunt her?
 5. Before the social service agency takes Astrid away, she packs up a few of her mother's possessions to take with her. What is the significance of the ex-acto knife? Of the kimono?
 6. Astrid tells Paul, "I don't let anyone touch me" (p. 265). Discuss how Claire touched Astrid. When and how else was Astrid touched by others? Discuss the powerful ways in which Astrid touched other people.
 7. Why did Astrid chose Rena as her new foster mother over Bill and Ann Greenway? Was Astrid trying to punish herself in some way? Why did she feel she deserved Rena?
 8. Discuss Ingrid's letters to Astrid. At what point did Astrid begin to pull away from her mother emotionally? At what point did this change?
 9. Referring to her relationship with Ray, Astrid said, "I was the snake in the garden" (p. 93). How does this phrase relate to Marvel, Claire, and Rena?
 10. Why did Astrid wait several hours before alerting Ron to Claire's death? In what ways did Astrid also die?
 11. Discuss Astrid's view of men. How did Ray compare to Ron? Did Astrid blame men for the bad things that happened to women?
 12. Why do you think Astrid so often found herself in the position of caregiver--to Starr's children, to Marvel's children, and to Claire--when she was so deeply in need of care herself?
 13. What was the ultimate life lesson Astrid learned in this coming-of-age journey? How did she triumph? Why would Astrid consider, and desire, a new life with her mother, yet not return to her in the end?
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Author Biography

Janet Fitch was born in Los Angeles, a third-generation native, and grew up in a family of voracious readers. As an undergraduate at Reed College, Fitch had decided to become an historian, attracted to its powerful narratives, the scope of events, the colossal personalities, and the potency and breadth of its themes. But when she won a student exchange to Keele University in England, where her passion for Russian history led her, she awoke in the middle of the night on her twenty-first birthday with the revelation she wanted to write fiction. "I wanted to Live, not spend my life in a library. Of course, my conception of being a writer was to wear a cape and have Adventures."

Since then, she has had more than a few Adventures. In addition, she has published short stories in literary journals such as *Black Warrior Review*, *Rain City Review*, and *A Room of One's Own*, briefly attended film school in the director's program at the University of Southern California, worked at various times as a typesetter, a proofreader, a graphic artist, a freelance journalist, the managing editor of *American Film* magazine, and the editor of *The Mancos Times Tribune*, a weekly newspaper in the mountains of Southwestern Colorado. Currently, she reviews books for *Speak* magazine in San Francisco, and teaches fiction writing privately in Los Angeles, where she lives with her husband and eight year old daughter.



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change literature?

Yes, I think that the Internet has had a big impact on literature in the fact that people can find out so much more about books and authors. Also consequently it can cut down on people's free time to read. I know there have been experiments in interactive writing. But I think writing fiction is the least collaborative of the arts. I think fiction is the result of one person's mad passion.

Do you have a routine or ritual you follow when you sit down to write?

I read poetry before I write, and I read it aloud because the poets are the standard bearers of language. Their work lives or dies word by word. When I read it aloud, that music is in my ear. Then when I write and can hear a clunky sentence, I try to write (up) to the poetry that I have recited beforehand.

Do you ever suffer from writer's block? If so how do you avoid it?

No, I do not ever suffer from writer's block. I got over that when I worked as a reporter. I had to come up with 20 stories a week. You lose your professionalism: you have to get the story out, so you do not ponder the stories. I write a lot of drafts of stories - thank God for the computer! So no, I do not suffer from this malady. My suggestion is to just fill up pages with text. You need to put your editor in the closet and not judge your work yourself.

Can you describe the mother/daughter relationship as your book begins? Why was the daughter Astrid fearful her mother would "fly away"?

I think there is always the mother we know and the mother we do not know. It is hard for a child to see their mother 'whole'. Astrid senses her mother's restlessness. The daughter feels the reason her mother is in the place she is in - the crummy job and the crummy apartment - is because of her, Astrid.

Astrid says early on that "My mother was not the least bit curious about ME". Do you think this is a common, normal attitude in children today? Isn't that very sad?

Oh yeah. I don't think it is just today. I think people fail to see the coming person in their child. They feel because they see the child the whole time that they know the child because of close proximity. We concentrate on managing children and other people a lot, and that negates our ability to see them whole. Also children are much better observers of adults than adults are of children. People who are dependent are much better observers than those who are not dependent.

Do you think Astrid became stronger and less of a victim by her mother's sins?

I think Astrid was stronger when her mother was confined to prison. I think the fact that her mother was in prison was paradoxically a good thing for the daughter. It was good because she would not otherwise have a chance to become an independent person. Her mother was just too big and demanded all the air in the room. Also having a parent who is flawed is easier on the developing self, because seeing where your parent goes wrong gives the child confidence that there is another way to be. I think people who have parents they see as 'too perfect' have nowhere to go as far as progress.

What lessons does Astrid learn about life as she begins to understand her own sexuality and boundaries?

I think that Astrid learns from her mother that people are basically used for sexual or ego gratification purposes. Astrid sees her mother dealing with men as objects of gratification. And then when Ingrid falls in love with Barry, she sees people can fall in love with the possession of other people. From there it is a long, long haul to actually see someone for what they are and not what they can be used for. This is the journey. Through all her experiences she develops the ability to love and to risk loving another person in a world where loss is constant. I think this is the biggest lesson of all.

Can you relate the significance of the title *White Oleander*?

Oleander is a plant that grows well in the worst situations. It blooms in the summer when the weather is 105 degrees, so it is very tough. It is also very poisonous, and the color white is an ongoing symbol in the book. It is a symbol for the mother Ingrid who sees things very much in black and white. If you could say the darker side of white, which is the insistence on purity, she has a fanaticism with purity. I believe a quality that serves us well in the real world is the ability to embrace the various emotional tones of experience. And to insist that reality reflects some ideal, I think, is a dangerous point of view. This is the basis of some of the philosophical arguments of mother and daughter: do you impose a view on the world, or do you look at the world and see what is there. There is a frigidity or sterility in the absolutist view, which is the mother's view. Astrid is afraid of things that are white. She is afraid of milk. She sees in dreams her mother's white eyes. She sees the sky as a cataract over God's eyes etc. Okay I hope I answered that!