

Discussion Questions for *In the Presence of the Enemy* by Elizabeth George

- 1) An epigraph in a work of fiction often introduces main themes addressed in the work, drawing the reader's attention to these ideas. Based on this, what do you make of the John Milton quote from *Paradise Lost* that George uses for an epigraph? ("*For neither man nor angel can discern Hypocrisy, the only evil that walks Invisible, except to God alone.*")
- 2) The online Oxford World Dictionary defines hypocrisy as "the practice of claiming to have higher standards or more noble beliefs than is the case." Based on this definition, how many examples of hypocrisy can you find in the behavior of these characters? Is the answer different if you use the Merriam-Webster definition "a feigning to be what one is not or to believe what one does not?"
- 3) The theme of misogyny runs throughout *In the Presence of the Enemy*. In what ways do the characters express and reinforce misogynistic thinking? In what ways do the characters refute or combat misogyny? What other forms of prejudice do Elizabeth George's characters demonstrate?
- 4) What examples of motherhood and fatherhood are present in the novel? Do you agree or disagree with the choices and reactions of the various parents? Who do you see as being the most successful as a parent (and why)? The least successful?
- 5) What about the children who have grown into adulthood? In what ways do they fulfill or avoid their relationships with their families?
- 6) Class plays a large role in British society. Where do you see evidence of this in *In the Presence of the Enemy*? Do these same issues extend across "the pond" and play out in America? If so, then how?
- 7) Why does Dennis feel so threatened by Leo? Does he come to terms with his fears regarding his son? What evidence can you provide?
- 8) How does Dennis' relationship to both of his children change throughout the book? Would these changes have taken place without the catastrophe of losing them?
- 9) The fates of Charlotte and Leo differ dramatically. Does the author's treatment of these two characters carry a message?
- 10) Do the names "Charlotte" (the feminine derivative of "Charles" meaning "free man") and "Leo" (meaning "lion") seem accurate to the characters carrying those names? How so?
- 11) Who is the enemy referred to by the title *In the Presence of the Enemy*? Can enemies also be allies? If so, in what ways does this occur in the book?
- 12) Are there heroes and/or heroines in this story? Who, and why? Or, if not, how does their absence affect your reading experience?
- 13) In the last line of the book, Fiona says, "Daddy's just doing your crying for you," providing some redemption for Dennis and Leo's relationship. What other relationships experience some level of redemption? What actions facilitate it?
- 14) Compare and contrast the images of motherhood: Eve, the powerbroker; Fiona, artist and stay-at-home mom; Robin's unbalanced mother; Barbara's mother who suffers from dementia. Discuss mother-child relationships in light of different motherhood images. Do you think the novel is making a statement about this most primal of relationships? If so, what does it have to say?

- 15) Unlike British journalism which tends to openly align with or criticize one side of the government, U.S. newspapers aspire to remain neutral and objective. In your opinion, which system creates better journalism and why?
- 16) How does George get us (and Barbara) to believe in the murderer's goodness? Did this individual make a convincing killer? Why or why not?
- 17) Discuss the themes of power and authority. Can you find examples of power and authority in unexpected places in *In the Presence of the Enemy*? At what points in the novel do characters experience powerlessness? Who has power and authority in the novel's relationships?
- 18) Betrayal is a recurring theme in *In the Presence of the Enemy*. How do characters betray each other or imagine that they have been betrayed? How does George show us the deep effects of these betrayals?
- 19) The rebirth image of Leo emerging from the muck of the crypt is a powerful one. Did Elizabeth George's writing conjure specific images for you? What were those images?