

# *The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë*

by Syrie James

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## READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Discuss the Brontë family dynamics. Describe Charlotte's relationship with her sisters, Emily and Anne. Why was Charlotte so devoted to her father? How did her relationship with her brother Branwell evolve and change over the years, and what influence did he have on her life?
2. What secrets did Charlotte and her siblings each keep, and why? Whose secret had the most devastating impact on the family? How did Charlotte's secret affect her life and her work?
3. Who are your favorite characters in the novel, and why? Who is your least favorite character?
4. What are your favorite scenes in the novel? What was the saddest scene? The happiest? The most uplifting? Did any scene make you laugh or cry?
5. Discuss Charlotte's relationship with Mr. Nicholls. When does he begin to care for Charlotte? How does he quietly go about pursuing her? How does the author maintain romantic tension between the two? Do you think Mr. Nicholls changes and grows over the course of the story?
6. In Chapter Five, Charlotte tells Ellen Nussey, "I am convinced I could never be a *clergyman's* wife." She lists the qualities she requires in a husband. How does Mr. Nicholls measure up to these expectations? What are his best and worst qualities? Why is Charlotte reluctant to accept Mr. Nicholls's proposal? What does Charlotte learn about herself—and her husband—after she marries? Do you think he turns out to be the ideal match for her?
7. What impact did Charlotte's experience at the Clergy Daughter's School have on her life and her work? How different was her experience at Roe Head School? In what ways did it change her life?
8. What was it about Monsieur Hegér that endeared him to Charlotte, and made such a life-long impression on her? Why do you think he cut off all communication with her? Discuss the ways in which Charlotte's experience in Brussels changed her, and influenced every one of her novels.
9. Did hearing the story of Charlotte's life in the first person enhance the reading experience for you? What are the benefits of telling this story from the main character's perspective, rather than the third person? What are the limitations?

10. How does Charlotte's dream imagery serve the story?
11. Discuss the ways in which the Brontë's financial circumstances, unique childhood, education (or lack of it), and environment—living as the only educated family in a remote village, surrounded by the moors—affected their lives, their personalities, and their writing.
12. Why were Emily and Charlotte both so insistent on keeping their writing ambitions a secret? Why did they choose an androgynous pseudonym? Once published, how did the reality compare to the dream for each of them? How did Charlotte's life change when she was no longer able to "walk invisible"?
13. How did Charlotte feel about a woman's role in Victorian England, when domesticity and motherhood were considered to be a sufficient emotional fulfillment for females? Would you consider Charlotte a feminist in today's terms? Do you think Charlotte's views affected her feelings about marriage?
14. Strict laws at the time gave a husband ownership of his wife's body, her property and wages, and custody of their children. Discuss other conditions in Victorian England, with regard to women—i.e., health, sanitation, food, travel, career opportunities, courtship, sex, and conventions of feminine beauty. How did they differ from our lives today? In what ways are things still the same? Given the choice, would you wish to live in Charlotte's era?
15. Branwell was initially considered the brightest artistic hope in the Brontë family. What personal, educational and societal factors contributed to his demise? How did Charlotte's feelings for Monsieur Héger affect her opinion of the way Branwell handled his affair with Mrs. Robinson?
16. What examples of irony can you find in the story? For example, why is it ironic that Emily's novel, *Wuthering Heights*, was so poorly received during her lifetime? Discuss the fates of Mr. Nicholls, Patrick Brontë, Charlotte, and her siblings; in what ways are they all ultimately both tragic and ironic?
17. Has *The Secret Diaries of Charlotte Brontë* changed your perception of Charlotte or the other people in her life? Did you learn anything that surprised you?
18. Examine the many ways in which Charlotte dramatized her own life experiences in her novels. How many people, places and events from her real life can you identify in *Jane Eyre*? In *Shirley*? *Villette*?
19. Compare and contrast Charlotte Brontë and her fictional creation, Jane Eyre, in terms of physical appearance, personality, romantic sensibilities and psychological desires. How successful is each woman in rising above the societal limitations placed upon her? Do they each ultimately remain true to themselves?
20. How successfully does the author capture Charlotte Brontë's voice? Did the novel inspire you to read or reread Charlotte's works, or the works of her sisters?