

***THE THIRD GRACE* DISCUSSION STARTERS**

COVER AND TITLE:

- Can you tell anything about this book from its cover?
- Consider the picture on the front: How does it relate thematically to the novel?
- Identify the mythological and theological implications of the book's title: To what does "Grace" refer mythologically and theologically? What might "Third" mean?

NAMES:

- What do you think is the significance of the main character's names (given and self-appointed): "Mary Grace" and "Aglaia"?
- Why did Mary Grace change her name?
- How is Aglaia like or different from her Greek mythical namesake?
- How is the process of finding her identity tied to Mary Grace/Aglaia's name?
- Do the other characters in the book match the meanings of their names (François, Lou, Naomi, Ebenezer . . .)?
- Do you know the meaning of your own name? How do you personally fulfill or reject it?

SETTING:

- Have you ever lived on or visited a farm like the Klassens'? Are you familiar with large-city life? Consider the problem of transition from one locale to the other—a farm girl moving to the city or a "city mouse" in the country.
- How does Aglaia's interest in Denver's arts scene influence her decisions?
- Does Paris live up to Aglaia's dreams?
- Note the difference between the office bookshelves of Lou, the professor (end of chapter five), and Eb, the boss (beginning of chapter seven) in the following excerpts. What might this say about their differing views on literature and learning—in fact, on their overall world views?

Lou was thoughtful, wanting to set the tone for future interactions. "Perhaps you could merge women's issues with your predilection for verse by focusing on the lyrical style developed by the Greek poet Sappho, who was exiled from her beloved island of Lesbos." Lou withdrew a key from her desk drawer and swiveled her chair to face the wall of streak-free glass-fronted bookshelves. "You strike me as a reliable person, Whitney. I'll lend you a resource that might start the juices flowing, and then we can meet to discuss the subject further." Lou often found Sappho stimulating to more than the intellect of her students.

The whole of [Eb's] room was a tumultuous clutter. The desk was loaded with files, fabric samples, patterns, and books—so many books! They spilled from the ceiling-to-floor shelving and piled up in drifts in the corners, beside the settee, behind the door. It was a madman's library. Aglaia never ceased to be amazed at how Eb MacAdam could so quickly answer her queries with a quote or put his hand on the very volume she needed for a design. She often saw him in here alone, lost in a story world, engrossed in Pilgrim's Progress while reaching for Gulliver's Travels. There was some order he alone could decipher. Illustrated manuals of contemporary and historical costumes of the world were mixed in with theological tomes and novels—the Brothers Grimm snuggled up to Dostoyevsky, Thomas Aquinas visiting Narnia. Four full sets of encyclopedias, bound in various colors, were seeded now among Arabian Nights and Knights of the Round Table and Dark Night of the Soul—the wheat and tares together.

PLOT:

- Do you remember being in love for the first time? Did this novel remind you of your own teenaged puppy love? In what ways?
- What is it about François that attracts Mary Grace? What is he looking for in the relationship?
- Did you find the sensual scenes too graphic? Why do you think the author included them, and how do they further the storyline?
- What is Aglaia/Mary Grace seeking in her life? From what is she running?
- Aglaia runs, faces, finds, and embraces. Give plot examples of how she **runs** (from family, faith, and farm), **faces** (her fears, her lover), **finds** (peace, her own identity), and **embraces** (her heritage, her spiritual mooring).

THEMES:

- Art appreciation plays a part in this novel; comment on your impressions about costume making and the stage, movies, literature, and paintings mentioned in the story.
- Consider the following quote (from near the end of chapter one) and talk about what part the Bible plays in Aglaia's life:

Her reading matter since her childhood days might surprise and even disturb [her mother] if she understood its content; it was nothing like the holy pap Aglaia was brought up on.

- François's notations in the Bible margins are strategically placed. How do these notes affect Aglaia emotionally and spiritually?
- Discuss the tension between the Greek mythological and the biblical stories in this novel (such as the mention of the rainbow at the beginning of chapter nine). Do you ever struggle with the more "legendary" aspects of stories you read in the Bible—for example, questioning the historicity behind (and connecting) Noah's flood and God's judgment or Jonah's great fish and Jesus' resurrection?

- Talk about the web of relationships in *The Third Grace* that includes aspects of love and lust, friendship, business interactions, familial bonding, and spiritual mentorship. Which relationships seem most real to you in a personal sense, and how do these qualities show themselves in your own interpersonal relationships?

How does spiritual integrity fit in with the aesthetic yearning for beauty and belonging? For example, Aglaia's love of sewing begins early in her life and is first expressed in costumes she makes for Vacation Bible School—a desire that becomes twisted up with soulish cravings (beginning of chapter eleven). Have you ever been tempted to worship creation rather than the Creator?