



A Feigned Madness | A Readers' Guide

by Tonya Mitchell

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Questions and Topics for Discussion

About the Book

The insane asylum on Blackwell's Island is a human rat trap. It is easy to get in, but once there it is impossible to get out. —Nellie Bly

Elizabeth Cochrane has a secret.

She isn't the madwoman with amnesia the doctors and inmates at Blackwell's Asylum think she is.

In truth, she's working undercover for the *New York World*. When the managing editor refuses to hire her because she's a woman, Elizabeth strikes a deal: in exchange for a job, she'll impersonate a lunatic to expose a local asylum's abuses.

When she arrives at the asylum, Elizabeth realizes she must make a decision—is she there merely to bear witness, or to intervene on behalf of the abused inmates? Can she interfere without blowing her cover? As the superintendent of the asylum grows increasingly suspicious, Elizabeth knows her scheme—and her dream of becoming a journalist in New York—is in jeopardy.

A Feigned Madness is a meticulously researched, fictionalized account of the woman who would come to be known as daredevil reporter Nellie Bly. At a time of cutthroat journalism, when newspapers battled for readers at any cost, Bly emerged as one of the first to break through the gender barrier—a woman who would, through her daring exploits, forge a trail for women fighting for their place in the world.

Discussion Questions

- » In the beginning of the novel, Elizabeth is desperate to find work. Why is this the case? Had you been in her position, would you have done what she did to get a job at the *New York World*?
- » Elizabeth arrives at the Essex Market police station and must answer questions before a judge. Were you surprised that her route to the asylum included this stop? Why do you think it was necessary that she go there first?

- » At Bellevue Hospital, Elizabeth is given two examinations, the results of which will determine her fate. What was the nature of these exams? Do you think they were capable of revealing whether she was mentally ill?
- » Elizabeth encounters a range of women at Blackwell's: immigrants, orphans, the elderly, the poor, the women on the rope. Would a mental institution of today have similar patients? Why or why not?
- » Elizabeth's relationship with George McCain plays out in flashbacks as well as the current story. What was McCain's way of showing his feelings for Elizabeth? How would you have felt toward him if you were her? Have you ever "fallen" for someone who was unsuitable or off-limits?
- » Superintendent Dent wants very much to punish Elizabeth. What kept him in check? Why did Nurses Grady, Grupe, and McCarten behave differently?
- » Why do you think Nurse Grady was so intent on taking Elizabeth inside the Lodge on her last night at Blackwell's? Why did Nurse Conway come to her rescue?
- » When Elizabeth returns home, she struggles with writing down her account of what happened at Blackwell's. Why? What made her finally write her story?
- » When McCain tells Elizabeth that the *Sun* has "scooped" her story, she goes to see the *World's* managing editor, John Cockerill. What was Cockerill's response? Did it surprise you?
- » What important detail did Elizabeth not reveal to Cockerill and leave out of her asylum exposé? Why? How did this omission get resolved during the grand jury investigation on the island at the novel's conclusion?

For Further Reflection

- » A main theme of *A Feigned Madness* is women's equality. Elizabeth struggles with wanting to enter a man's profession—journalism. In the 1880s, few women were working at newspapers. Have women today made any inroads into being treated fairly when it comes to their professions of choice? In what ways are women still fighting for equality today?
- » Mental illness was little understood in Elizabeth's day. What progress has been made in the causes and cures of mental illness today? Do misconceptions and confusion still exist?

About the Author



Tonya Mitchell received her BA in journalism from Indiana University. Her fiction has appeared in the *Copperfield Review*, *Words Undone*, and the *Front Porch Review*, as well as in various anthologies, including *Furtive Dalliance*, *Welcome to Elsewhere*, and *Glimmer and Other Stories and Poems*, for which she won the Cinnamon Press award in fiction. She is a self-professed Anglophile and is obsessed with all things relating to the Victorian period. She is a member of the Historical Novel Society North America and resides in Cincinnati, Ohio, with her husband and three wildly energetic sons.

Get in Touch

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