

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE BOOKSHOP OF YESTERDAYS*

**AMY MEYERSON**

# the imperfects

A NOVEL



"An imperfect family inherits the perfect diamond  
in this clever tale of secrets, family dynamics, and resilience."

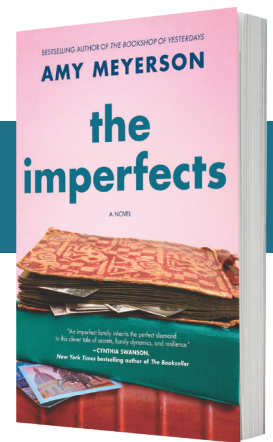
—**CYNTHIA SWANSON,**

*New York Times* bestselling author of *The Bookseller*



# Discussion Guide

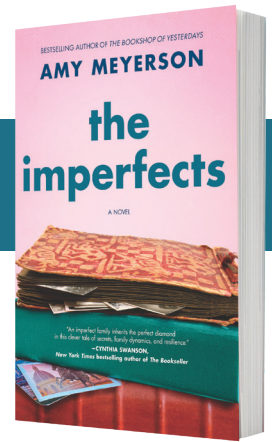
## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR *THE IMPERFECTS*



- 1) The novel begins in Vienna in 1918 with a woman writing in her journal. Who did you think this woman was? When did you realize her connection to the Millers? To the Florentine Diamond?
- 2) *The Imperfects* is told from the point of view of each of the Millers—Beck, Ashley, Jake and Deborah—so we’re able to see them through their own eyes and each other’s. How did your perceptions of and allegiances to the characters evolve and shift as you learned more about them?
- 3) Why do you think Helen left the brooch only to Beck? Do you think Helen wanted Beck to share it with the Millers? Do you think Helen wanted them to uncover her secrets? Why do you think Helen didn’t tell her family about her past?
- 4) Why do you think Helen kept the Florentine Diamond rather than selling it? Do you have any family heirlooms that have been passed down for generations? What stories do they tell of your family?
- 5) When Jake visits Mr. Frankel, the old man tells him, “If we don’t tell stories, they disappear.” What role does storytelling play in the novel? Why do you think it ends with Jake’s movie? What would have happened to the Millers if their family’s story disappeared?
- 6) The diamond is often spoken of in terms of “value.” Different characters have different reasons for fixing monetary or emotional value on the object. Is there a character whom you felt best understood the diamond’s value? How so?
- 7) The novel interweaves fictional narratives with historical moments from the fall of the Habsburg Empire and the Holocaust. How does the novel speak to the role history plays in individuals’ lives? Is there an event from history that has reverberated across generations of your family?
- 8) As Jake acknowledges in his two films about the Millers—*My Summer of Women* and *The Women’s Empire*—the Millers are a matriarchal family without father figures. How do you think the absence of male role models informs the characters and their relationships?
- 9) What was your perception of Viktor? Did you trust him? Were you surprised by his actions toward the end of the novel?
- 10) When the Millers are in Vienna, Beck momentarily hopes the Millers will lose their case. Why is this? What does this say about a country’s claim to cultural property compared to an individual’s?
- 11) What did you think about the fate of the Florentine Diamond at the end of the novel? How about the way the civil forfeiture case concluded? Who do you think the diamond should have gone to? Why?
- 12) What’s the significance of the novel’s title, *The Imperfects*? How does it relate to the Millers? The Florentine Diamond?
- 13) Forgiveness is a main theme of the book. In what ways is the diamond a catalyst for the conversations and confrontations that lead to forgiveness?

# Discussion Guide

## BEHIND THE BOOK



At 137 carats, it's difficult to believe a diamond as massive as the Florentine could just disappear. When it went missing from the Habsburg royal family a century ago, the Austrian Empire was at the brink of dissolution. In 1918, Emperor Karl von Habsburg sent one of his aides to gather whatever crown jewels he could and send them ahead to Switzerland, where the royal family would spend their first years in exile. But when the Habsburgs arrived, the Florentine Diamond wasn't there. It has never been seen since.

Rumors abound about its fate. Many believe a trusted advisor stole it and disappeared to South America. Others think the Habsburgs sold the diamond well under market value. There's even a theory that it never left Austria and eventually Hitler had it buried in a mine in Salzburg. Equally unknown are the diamond's origins. It belonged to the House of Medici in Florence before being passed on to the House of Habsburg-Lorraine in Austria, where Marie Antoinette wore it on her wedding day. Then Napoleon's second wife—a Habsburg herself—brought it to France, but its history before the 17th century is murky.

Part of the problem is that, throughout history, there are few references to the diamond. During my research, I was able to locate only one photograph from the late 1800s of the Florentine on display—at a museum in Vienna, set in a royal hatpin with many smaller diamonds.

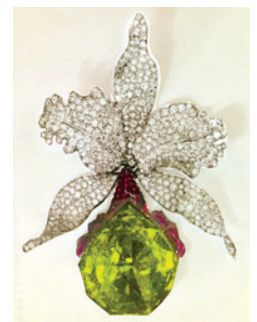


Though missing for a hundred years, the Florentine is still out there somewhere, bearing centuries of history. This is what drew me to write about the Florentine in *The Imperfects*—not just the mystery of what happened to the diamond but its embodiment of pasts, personal and global, real and imagined.

When I began writing, I knew a diamond with such a chaotic and dysfunctional history was an ideal emblem for capturing an equally chaotic and dysfunctional family like the Millers. I was curious to discover how much the Millers could learn about the past from the diamond and other records left behind. This is one of my favorite elements of writing—the puzzle solving an author must do in order to construct a story.

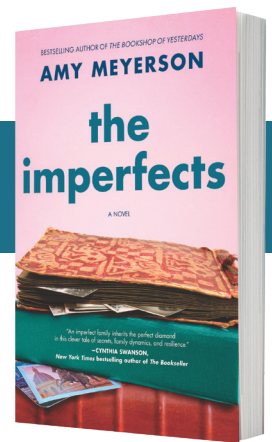
I started by learning as much as I could about diamonds. When I visited the Gemology Institute of America (GIA), the experts there taught me how diamonds are graded with notations of their singular characteristics. Most diamonds aren't perfect. They have flaws that make them unique. Other than a clear paper trail that establishes ownership, these imperfections are the only way to identify a diamond. When I heard this, it sounded like the perfect metaphor for my novel about the Millers.

At GIA, the historians also explained that the Florentine would have been re-set to hide its identity. Together, we explored possible designs for a piece that could house the Florentine until we settled on a mid-century orchid brooch:



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They helped me incorporate several details within the brooch that would enable the Millers to uncover how their grandmother Helen had hidden the diamond in plain sight.

This became the crux of my story: How did Helen acquire the Florentine and why did she secretly keep it rather than sell it for millions? Usually, when we think of missing diamonds, we think of elaborate heists and illicit sales on the black market. I didn't want that. Instead, after speaking to an art lawyer, I realized that the Florentine could be a reward for remarkable bravery. When I toured Sotheby's Magnificent Jewels collection, the specialist outlined how historic diamonds gain value from their history. The better the story, the more they're worth. If I could come up with an incredible story explaining the Florentine Diamond's disappearance, it would only make the diamond more valuable.

I also knew right away that I wanted to set the novel in Philadelphia, my hometown. Living in LA, I'm often homesick for my city, and writing allows me to be present there while living far away. So, I had my starting place—1918 Vienna—and my end location—modern-day Philadelphia—but there were still one hundred years that needed to be accounted for.

At first, I was resistant to writing about the Holocaust, even though I knew Helen was an Austrian Jew. As I began to learn more about Vienna and visited the city, I understood that I couldn't really tell a story about the fall of the Habsburg Empire without acknowledging its demise twenty years later, when the Nazis annexed Austria into Germany. While my Jewish ancestors hail from various parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, they were lucky to immigrate to America before Hitler came into power. But their story didn't capture the trauma and courage I needed to craft Helen's story and to inspire the Millers to change. So, I forced myself to be courageous in turn and to explore darker corners of history in order to build the Millers' past.

This turned out to be my favorite aspect of writing *The Imperfects*—blending true and invented histories and grappling with the question of what we can know about the past based on what's left behind. While most of us are not so fortunate as to find a valuable gemstone behind our grandmother's dresser, we usually have family narratives we at least partially know. *The Imperfects* is a story of resilience, courage and family flaws, but most of all, it's a story about the little ways we are connected, and how the past can lead us toward a better future. I hope you love reading it as much as I loved writing it.