

Reading Group Guide

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *The Pindar Diamond*, a novel of fortune and romance set in Venice at the turn of the seventeenth century.

About this book

The Pindar Diamond picks up four years after *The Aviary Gate*'s adventures in Constantinople. Now, in 1603, Paul Pindar and his servant, John Carew, are in Venice, where Pindar, still mourning the loss of his beloved Celia Lamprey to the Sultan's harem, tries to forget his grief at Venice's gambling parlors. Desperate to bring Pindar to his senses—and out of debt—Carew calls upon Ambrose Jones, a sinister collector who has other dealings in Venice. Ambrose is determined to secure two priceless treasures: the Sultan's Blue, a diamond rumored to have been stolen from the Sultan's harem, and a live mermaid.

A giantess named Maryam has just discovered that mermaid: a stranger thrust the frail baby and its dazed, amnesiac mother upon Maryam's troupe of female acrobats. Maryam is determined to bring the mermaid to Venice, where a doctor might be able to save its life.

Meanwhile, Annetta, now living a pious life at the Convent of Santa Clara, is about to meet her match: Carew has been sneaking into the convent, at first for secret liaisons with nuns, but now to track down the elusive Sultan's Blue. When the diamond is finally found, Pindar decides to risk everything to win it—his instincts tell him that the diamond will lead him to his long-lost Celia.

For discussion

1. Describe Paul Pindar's state of mind as the novel opens. Are his fortunes in as bad a state as Carew and Constanza fear? What are the sources of his desperation, and how are his friends able to guide him through his dark days in Venice?
2. Consider how *The Pindar Diamond* brings early-seventeenth-century Venice to life. What sights, sounds, and smells of the ancient city does the novel evoke? Which characters suffer most from the dangers of the city: its temptations, debaucheries, and illnesses?
3. Many of the characters in *The Pindar Diamond* strive for two types of fortune: money and luck. Who is successful in the search for riches? Who finds talismans of good luck? When does luck fail, and another force—love, fate, or even rash behavior—take over? When does a game of chance become a swindle for fortune?
4. As Carew returns to the Santa Clara convent, he wonders, "Why was it . . . that nuns always held such a peculiar fascination?" (123–24) Compare the Santa Clara convent to Annetta's previous home, the Sultan's harem. Which place hides more secrets and intrigue: the convent or the harem?

5. In a flashback, Maryam reveals the violence and horror of her childhood. What troubles did Maryam endure as a young giantess? How does Maryam's past influence her present, as she tries to rescue the mermaid baby and its mother? What makes Maryam so determined to protect her two charges?
6. Ambrose Jones is the most sinister villain in *The Pindar Diamond*, causing trouble all over Venice in a few short days. What motivates Ambrose's ruthless search for the Sultan's Blue and the mermaid?
7. As Constanza deals a deck of tarot cards, two images keep reappearing: the Lovers and Death. Whose fates are revealed in these cards? Who represents the lovers, and whose ultimate fate is death?
8. Compare the two short chapters that open each half of the novel: Chapter 1 (3) and Chapter 23 (157). What horrors at sea does the narrator describe? Why is the narrator voiceless in the first chapter, and what "baptism" and "rebirth" does she describe in the later chapter? What is the effect of the repetition between these similar chapters?
9. The actual location of the Sultan's Blue is unclear for much of the novel. Who seemed most likely to be hiding the precious diamond, before it appeared at the *ridotto*? How did it finally come into Zuanne Memmo's hands?
10. Consider the novel's description of the *ridotto*, Zuanne Memmo's secret gambling parlor. How does this room set the scene for the nerve-racking competition for the Sultan's Blue? Why do the players mask their identities? What double-crosses does Pindar face during this gambling marathon in the *ridotto*?
11. What does the inscription on the Sultan's Blue—"My heart's desire"—seem to mean? How does the meaning of the inscription change as the diamond changes hands? To whose "heart's desire" does the diamond ultimately lead? Who is deceived or disappointed by the diamond's powers?
12. Elena, the illusionist in Maryam's troupe of tumblers, plays a small but key role in *The Pindar Diamond*. What kind of relationship do Elena and Maryam have? What effect do Elena's illusions—making items disappear and reappear—have upon other characters?
13. Pindar risks his newly won diamond to read Celia Lamprey's last poem. What longings, regrets, and desires does the poem express? Do you agree with Pindar's interpretation of the poem—that Celia thought she would see her fiancé again? Or do you agree with Annetta's belief that Celia knew she would not make it to the Aviary Gate? Explain your answer.
14. Discuss the relationship between Annetta and Carew. What is the basis of their attraction? Their budding love story ends on an ambiguous note—why does Carew walk away from Annetta at the end of *The Pindar Diamond*? Might they ever meet again? Does Annetta's health seem doomed by the plague that is sweeping through the convent?

15. If you have read *The Aviary Gate*, Katie Hickman's first novel about Paul Pindar and Celia Lamprey, how does *The Pindar Diamond* compare to the previous book? What future adventures can you imagine for Pindar, Celia, Annetta, and Carew?

Katie Hickman is the author of six previous books, including two bestselling history books, *Courtesans* and *Daughters of Britannia*. She has written two travel books. *Travels with a Circus*, about her experiences traveling with a Mexican circus, which was shortlisted for the 1993 Thomas Cook Travel Book Award, and *Dreams of the Peaceful Dragon*, about a journey on horseback through the forbidden Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. She was shortlisted for the *Sunday Times* Young British Writer of the Year award for her novel *The Quetzal Summer*. Katie Hickman lives in London with her two children and her husband, the philosopher A. C. Grayling.

Suggested reading

Katie Hickman, *The Aviary Gate* and *Courtesans*; Christi Phillips, *The Rosetti Letter*; Marina Fiorato, *The Glassblower of Murano*; Donna Russo Morin, *The Secret of the Glass*; Tracy Chevalier, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*; Vanitha Sankaran, *Watermark*; Barbara Quick, *Vivaldi's Virgins*; Caroline P. Murphy, *Murder of a Medici Princess*; Michelle Lovric, *The Floating Book*.