

Discussion Guide for

Island of the Mad, by Laurie R. King

The trail leads Russell and Holmes through Bedlam's stony halls to the warm Venice lagoon, where ethereal beauty is jarred by Mussolini's Blackshirts, where the gilded Lido set may be tempting a madwoman, where Cole Porter sits at a piano, playing with ideas...

1. Can an insane asylum function as an actual *asylum*, a place to shelter from the world? Can quiet routine be a more effective way of treating mental illness than modern drugs and treatment? Or does it depend on the mental illness?
2. Were you surprised to learn that men could commit their female relations to asylums? How has this changed, and how does it remain a possibility?
3. Women's clubs, women's communities: is separation the only way women can be themselves—in the Twenties? Now?
4. *Island of the Mad* has a number of non-traditional characters in it: the many LGBTQ characters Russell and Holmes meet in Venice; Cole Porter—a gay man in love with his wife; Russell and Holmes themselves, with their remarkable difference in age. Are these oddities of a libertine city in the Twenties, or are complex relationships found in all times and places?
5. Fascism rose across Europe in the Thirties, including in England. Why do you think the British Fascisti of Rosa Lintorn-Orman or Oswald Mosley's later Union of Fascists did not seize England as Fascism did Germany and Italy? Is it rooted in their greater

losses in the First World War? Is it due to the different governmental systems? What does it say about the modern rise in Fascist impulses?

6. People read historical fiction to explore places and ideas they did not know. How important is solid research to you in reading a book like *Island of the Mad*?

7. Venice is both a place and a state of mind—and in this book, it is almost more a character than a stage for the story. Could this story have been set in any other time or place?

Additional background material about *Island of the Mad* can be found on the book's web page, with an excerpt and links to Pinterest images and blog posts.

<http://laurierking.com/books/island-of-the-mad/overview>