Book Club Questions
The Women in White by Sarah Pekkanen

Behind *The Women in White* by Sarah Pekkanen

The Women in White is based on real research from the 1960s, especially studies done at Duke University's Parapsychology Laboratory. This research used unethical methods, such as sensory deprivation. It also examines the limited control and freedom women had in institutions at the time.

Icebreaker Question:

If you suddenly woke up tomorrow with genuine psychic abilities or mind-reading powers, what is the most harmless, hilarious, or petty way you would use it in your day-to-day life?

Book club questions by Princeton Book Review

1. How does Riley's vulnerability affect how willing she is to explore Betty's past? Did her challenges make her more or less trustworthy as a storyteller?

2. Betty lives without the internet, TV, or cell phone. Is her isolation a choice, a result of trauma, or something else? How does this setting create tension in the present?

3. In 1964, studies on ESP in parapsychology faced serious issues because participants did not give proper consent. Dr. Trimble defends these methods, but where do we draw the line between making an important discovery and causing psychological harm?

4. Do you think Betty's husband, Richard, acted mainly because of his own goals, or because of the medical and social influences of the 1960s?

5. Do you think someone can keep a spouse isolated and controlled for 60 years to hide a secret experiment in today's world?

6. How do you think the tone of the book would have changed if Richard's control had been written more realistically-for example, if Betty was allowed to watch modern TV but was still psychologically too terrified to leave the house?

7. Do you think David acted with bad intentions toward Ivy, or was he just a product of the academic culture in the 1960s that valued men's success over women's safety?

8. Did you see the women's collective "Gift" as a real supernatural ability or just a way to cope with the pressure of the experiments?

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9. Do you think the fates of the women were only caused by Dr. Trimble's invasive testing, or did their own life experiences, like Ivy's stressful marriage to David, also play a role in their struggles?

10. Of the four women, who do you think suffered the worst fate at the hands of the Marquis University research team?

11. Which timeline did you find more compelling and suspenseful: Betty's 1960s era or Riley's present-day search for the truth?