

The Absent Heart

by Ali Bacon

Guide for Reading Groups

I'm always delighted to meet readers in any situation. If you'd like me to visit your book club or reading group (face to face or virtually!) please contact me via alibwriter@gmail.com

About the book:

The Absent Heart recounts the life of Frances Sitwell (1838 – 1924), muse to the iconic Scottish writer R.L. Stevenson. The book explores a complex web of relationships which has Frances at its centre and looks at how an educated woman navigates the landscape of friendship, love and desire in Victorian England. Themes of motherhood and male sexuality are also explored.

Discussion Points

- From the mid-19th century, divorce for women was legalised. Since at the start of the book, Frances is in an abusive marriage, do you think she could have been more proactive in leaving her husband?
- Do you think it's generally true that women in Victorian society had little agency, or do you know of any exceptions?
- Frances chooses Sidney Colvin over R.L. Stevenson, but they don't marry for a very long time. Do you think she would have been happier had she gone with the younger man?
- Did Frances lose your sympathy at any point in the story?
- Do you think modern women have more options than those available to Frances, or do they have to make similar choices?
- Comparing Fanny Osbourne/Stevenson to Frances Sitwell, who would you say is the stronger character?
- Were you surprised at Sidney's bi-sexuality, or Frances's acceptance of it?