

THE MEMORY WARD

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DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. The epigraph from Marcel Proust reads: “*Remembrance of things past is not necessarily remembrance of things as they were.*” What does this quote mean? What memories from your own life have changed over time? Why do we hold onto certain memories and repress others?
2. Discuss how the setting of Bethlam, Nevada, plays a role in the novel. What are some “small town” tropes that you noticed? What are some ways in which the town feels disquieting? What commentary is being made about safe, idyllic small towns?
3. Part 1 and Part 2 both begin the same way: “*Mailbag slung over my shoulder, sun helmet tipped back on my head.*” This sentence is repeated other times as well. What is the effect of this repetition? Do you consider Wally and Hank to be the same person?
4. What do you make of Wally’s story being hidden behind wallpaper? What might the wallpaper symbolize?
5. There are a few references to Bethlam once having been a company town for scientists testing nuclear weapons. What is the significance of this? Why do you think the scientists behind the Bethlam Project chose the Nevada desert to play out the experiment?
6. What are some clues and oddities throughout the novel that reveal the subjects are part of an experiment?
7. Each of the characters deals with vivid memories that we later learn are manufactured. Do our memories define us as human beings? How would you react if you found out that your memories weren’t real?
8. What were your impressions of the scientists in the novel? Did they come across as caring? Indifferent? Cruel?
9. Do human beings have souls? Is our soul related to language? Identity? Do the characters in *The Memory Ward* essentially get new souls? Despite being murderers in their former lives, are they once again innocent?
10. Do you think the so-called Bethlam Project is ethical? If the technology existed to wipe away traumatic memories and replace them with pleasant ones, would you volunteer to be “scrubbed”?
11. What about using criminals for neurological experiments? If scientists were able to improve the lives of the masses by sacrificing prisoners, would you be okay with it?
12. In the first experiment, Wally is unmarried, his father is alive (although with dementia), and his mother is dead. In the second experiment, Hank is married, his father is dead, and his mother is still alive. Why do you think the architects behind the Bethlam Project changed Hank/Wally’s back story?
13. We learn that Catherine Gordon used to be known as Lucinda Desmond and that she had killed her child. Do you think Catherine knows deep down that she is a child killer? Is it possible to wipe away something that traumatic?
14. Veronica Miller is the character who connects Hank, Wally, and Catherine’s stories. What do you make of her? Do you trust her? Why do you think she chose to tell Wally and Hank what she knew?
15. The end of the novel is very ambiguous. Hank’s wife and doctor claim that he is losing his mind and that the story beneath the wallpaper was actually his own madness. What do you think? Was there actually a wide-spread experiment? Or was the entire story a product of Hank’s delusions?