

Bioethics Book Club



The Mad Women's Ball, A Novel

By Victoria Mas

The Overlook Press, 2021.

Summary¹

The year is 1885. Dr. Charcot is a neurologist with expertise in hypnosis and hysteria, practicing his science at the Salpêtrière Asylum in Paris. The Asylum houses women who are deemed mad, locked away and excluded from society, often because they are unwanted, unconventional, or too strong-willed.

Geneviève, a senior nurse working at the hospital, has put her trust in Dr Charcot and his science, but meeting Eugénie, a young girl from a bourgeois Parisian family who is admitted to Salpêtrière because she claims to communicate with spirits, forces Geneviève to question everything she believes in.

Ethical Issues:

Power imbalance in Medicine

Dehumanization

Social norms

Women's rights

Stigma

Respect for patients

Discussion questions:

- What was your initial impression of the book? What stood out the most to you?
- What word would best describe the women's status at Salpêtrière – are they patients or are they prisoners? (Consider the different characters' stories and reason for being admitted)
- Identify and discuss different types of stigma experienced by the women in Salpêtrière. How do they compare to women's experiences today?
- Why do you think Eugénie's father decided to have her admitted?

¹ Adapted from publisher's summary.

- Why do you think Geneviève decided she needed to speak to the former patient, Jeanne Beaudon?
 - Why do you think she felt guilty about it?
- How would you describe the transformation that Geneviève goes through after what happened to Louise?
- When Geneviève approaches Dr. Charcot to advocate for Eugénie she is facing a dilemma with no good outcomes. Why do you think she chose to help Eugénie?
- Did the ending surprise you? Why or why not?
- What similarities did you see between the Salpêtrière and modern health care facilities?

Discuss the following passages from the book:

p. 152. The doctor crouches next to her, shows her the instrument he is holding, a long, pointed metal rod, but she cannot hear what he is saying. He pushes up her right sleeve and presses the pointed end of the rod against her upper arm. Reflexively, she tries to pull away to avoid the pain, but she cannot move, her arm is rigid. Charcot continues with this task.

P. 160-161. How is it possible to believe in something for so long only to one day question it? Is it possible that she cannot trust herself? Is it possible for her to reconsider her loyalty to this hospital whose values she has championed for so long?

P. 161. What had shocked her when she first entered was the general inaction of the men present. Louise was lying on the stage, her left arm flailing, crying and pleading for help, and not a single man had intervened, as though they had all been turned into statues by a woman's despair.

P. 175. 'In future, Geneviève, I would be grateful if you did not bother me with the individual cases. Your role in this hospital is to care for the patients, not diagnose them. I'll thank you not to overstep the bounds of your work here.' [...] p.176. She takes the reprimand without a word, then leaves the room so as not to further disturb the doctor who has returned to his work, completely oblivious to her presence.