

## Questions for Book Discussion

### *Fever*

*by Mary Beth Keane*

1. The story of Mary Mallon exemplifies a conflict between personal liberty and public health. Examine both sides of this conflict, discuss whether you think Mary's case was well handled, and consider how it might have been dealt with today.
2. In early-twentieth century New York, class and background dictated a person's prospects. Find moments in the text when people discriminated against Mary for being a poor Irish woman. How does Mary handle these situations? Are there any instances in which Mary uses her identity to her advantage?
3. Mary and Alfred live together as an unmarried couple. Many people felt these circumstances were inappropriate, and the issue arises repeatedly. Are there any consequences to their situation? Do you think things would have turned out differently had Alfred proposed to Mary?
4. The vibrant image of Mary's hat, "cobalt blue with silk flowers and berries cascading around the brim" (page 63), stays with her during her exile on North Brother and beyond. What does the hat symbolize for Mary? Consider the scene in which Mary encounters Mrs. Bowen wearing the exact same hat; Mrs. Bowen maintains that her hat is "Similar, Mary, not identical."

But I see what you mean" (page 67). Why does Mrs. Bowen deny that she has the same hat as her cook?

5. Alfred constantly moves between various odd jobs in the city and in Minnesota, while Mary seems to have few choices: cooking (or baking), laundry, or factory work. Discuss how gender affects the characters' options during this time. Consider Alfred and Mary, as well as the others in their building (Mila Borriello, Fran Mosely, Joan Graves, Jimmy Tiernan), Liza Meaney, and John Cane.
6. The media, particularly the newspapers, plays a significant role in Mary's story. Reread the article printed at the beginning of the novel (page 13). How do reporters influence the outcome of Mary's trial?
7. Compare Mary's situation to the case of the upstate dairy farmer. Why and how were they handled differently?
8. Mary has a justified distrust of doctors and others in the medical profession, especially after learning that the gall-bladder surgery so emphatically pushed on her would have been completely futile. Later, when the doctors on North Brother try to explain the way germs and disease spread, to Mary it sounds "like a fairy tale meant for children, a little world too small for the human eye to see, or like religion, in that they were asking her to believe such a thing existed without giving her a chance to look at it, hold it, understand it" (page 232). Consider the manner in which the medical profession is portrayed throughout

the story. Compare Mary's experiences with doctors to Alfred's after his injuries. How do the doctors mislead Alfred?

9. Mary is an extremely headstrong, stubborn character. Yet when Alfred refuses to taper off his medicine at the reduction clinic, Mary does not protest at all. Why does Mary let Alfred descend so far into addiction?
10. After her first release from North Brother Island, Mary abides by her promise not to cook. But as time passes, she is eventually drawn back to the profession: first at the bakery, then at the hospital. How does she justify her decisions, despite the risk to others? Do you think she believes she is responsible for passing Typhoid Fever through her cooking? Why or why not? At what point does she give in to the reality of her predicament?
11. The story is split into three sections: "Habeas Corpus," "Liberty," and "His Banner Over Me in Love." Discuss what each part title illustrates about the events that happen within the section.
12. Why do you think the Epilogue is written in Mary's own voice, in the first person? How does this shift affect your reading of the final pages of the story? Do you gain any further insight into Mary's character from these pages?