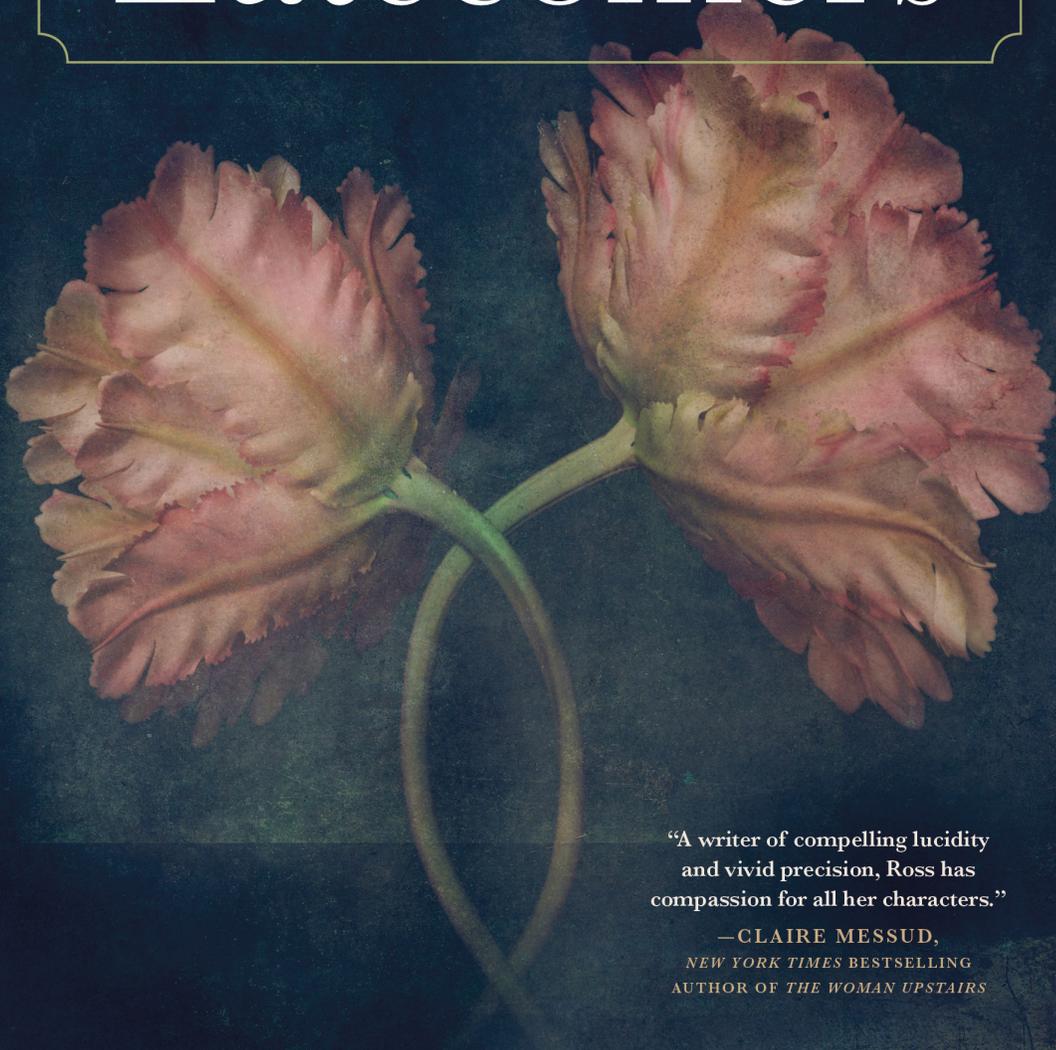


By the author of *What Was Mine*

HELEN KLEIN ROSS

*The*  
Latecomers



“A writer of compelling lucidity  
and vivid precision, Ross has  
compassion for all her characters.”

—CLAIRE MESSUD,  
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR OF *THE WOMAN UPSTAIRS*



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

# The Latecomers

By Helen Klein Ross

## Discussion Guide

*The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

## Introduction

Told in interweaving timelines, *The Latecomers* is the story of five generations of a Connecticut blueblood family and how they are changed forever by an Irish immigrant girl they hire as a housemaid in 1909. The novel unfolds from a mysterious death and includes love, betrayals, old money, motherhood and meticulously researched American history, bringing steam engines, top hats and suffragettes into colorful collision with cell phones, 9/11 and ancestry apps.

In 1908, sixteen-year-old Bridey runs away from a small town in Ireland with the boy she intends to marry, Thom. But after Thom dies of ship fever on their ocean crossing, Bridey finds herself alone and pregnant in a strange new world. Forced by circumstance to give up the baby for adoption, Bridey finds work as a housemaid for the Hollingworth family at a lavish, sprawling estate in Connecticut. It's the dawn of a new century: innovative technologies are emerging, women's roles are changing, and Bridey is emboldened by the promise of a fresh start. She cares for the Hollingworth family as if she is one of them, until a mysterious death changes Bridey and the household forever. For decades, the secrets of Bridey's past haunt the family until the youngest Hollingworth inadvertently brings a long-buried truth to light.

A tale of loss, desire, identity and betrayal, *The Latecomers* is ultimately a story about the sacrifices we make for those we love.

## Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. *The Latecomers* encapsulates both the sweep of a century of American history and small moments as people live through historical events. How do historical events and personal histories intersect in the novel? At which points do these intersections most impact the characters' storylines?
2. What themes are suggested by the title of the book? How does the title relate to each of the main characters: Bridey, Sarah and Vincent?
3. What is the effect of knowing from the beginning of the book that Mr. Hollingworth dies?
4. How would Bridey's life have been different if she'd been born 50 years later, in 1942? 100 years later in 1992?

5. How would Sarah's life have been different if her older brother had lived? What if she'd been the youngest daughter instead of the oldest?
6. What made Nettie stop talking after Sarah's brother died? Why didn't the family insist that Nettie continue her schooling?
7. How does Ross comment on race and gender roles in the various eras? Which characters challenge those roles and how?
8. In writing this novel, Ross jumps back and forth in time. Why? What is gained by this method and what is lost?
9. How would Bridey's life be different if Thom had lived?
10. When Bridey decides to give up her son for adoption, she "felt desperate to mark him." Why does she feel this way?
11. Do you think Sarah was justified in urging Bridey to give up her child?
12. What role does religion play in Bridey's life? In Sarah's?
13. What is gained when young and old generations connect, as Vincent does with his grandfather? What is lost when they fail to connect, as with Vincent and his father?
14. How does the relationship between Bridey and Sarah change over the course of the book?
15. Do you think Sarah's adopting Vincent was fortunate for Bridey, or not? In what ways did Vincent benefit from his adoption? In what ways did he suffer because of it?
16. If you were Vincent's parent, how would you raise him differently?
17. Why do you think Bridey, a devout Catholic, didn't try harder to convert Vincent to Catholicism?
18. When Bridey returns to Ireland, how has she changed? How has she remained the same?
19. If you were born in Sarah and Bridey's day, what would you miss most about living in the present? What would you most appreciate?
20. Ross dramatizes the first sexual experiences of three young women: Bridey, Sarah and Emma. How are their experiences different? How are they the same?
21. Describe the dynamic between Sarah and her husband Edmund. How does it change before marriage and after. How is their relationship perceived by their granddaughter Ruth who finds Edmund's letters years after he wrote them?
22. How does Ross portray Edmund's mother as an unsympathetic character?
23. When Ruth brings Connie home from boarding school, why does Bea react as she does?

24. When Vincent discovers the secret of his origin, what explains his reaction? Why doesn't he share his discovery with his daughter and granddaughter?
25. How would Vincent's life have been different if he'd been born a girl?
26. How is Emma like Ruth was as a teenager? How is she different? Do you recognize anything of Bridey or Vincent in Emma?
27. How do you think Emma reacts to receiving the email in the last chapter?

## Book Club Suggestions

1. Serve soda bread or other foods Bridey grew up with:  
<http://www.donaldskehan.com/journal/my-top-traditional-irish-recipes/>
2. Every family has home remedies they rely on, just as Bridey did in taking care of Mr. Hollingworth and Vincent. What are your family's go-to's for first signs of illness? A list of homeopathic remedies can be found here:  
<https://chehomeopathy.com/10-top-homeopathic-remedies-for-your-first-aid-kit/>
3. Discuss the differences in modern day approaches to birthing by midwives and doctors. Which do you feel more comfortable with, and why?
4. Show a clip of one of the silent movies Vincent saw as a child, and discuss the differences in filmgoing today.  
"The Immigrant" <http://bit.ly/ImmigrantChaplin>  
"Frankenstein" <http://bit.ly/Frankenstein1910>  
"Birth of a Nation" <http://bit.ly/BirthofNation1915>