

Reading Group Guide for EXPOSURE by Helen Dunmore, Grove Atlantic

1. Set primarily in early 1960's London, *Exposure* charts one family's terrifying experience as cold war paranoia turns their world upside down. Consider the ways in which Dunmore depicts the city of London – with its rain, wind, and fog - and discuss how this omnipresent backdrop contributes to the atmosphere of the novel. How does it affect the characters? How far does it impact and influence their lives? Is it representative in some way of this particular era?

2. The novel's action begins with the whistle of a train "shearing through the cold, thick dust of a November afternoon" (p. 5) and connecting lives. Trains are prominent throughout the novel - for example, as a shared hobby for Paul Callington and his father Simon, as part of a daily commute "of weary office workers swaying as they strap-hang their way home" (p.169). Find other examples of the importance of trains. What do they mean to Giles Holloway? To Lily? And consider Simon's memories too: "...he used to pretend he was on the train and rushing away through the darkness. Sometimes he became the train itself. Rushing and rushing into the dark, until he slept." (p.169)

3. At the sound of the train's whistle, Lily Callington is struck with deep-rooted fear and has to remind herself, "You are standing on your own patch of earth. Your name is Lily Callington. You are in England now." Talk about the effect these words had on you on first reading them. What do they immediately say about Lily? What did they make you wonder about her, this woman standing in the cold, digging her vegetable patch and worrying about her children?

4. Continue this line of discussion by rereading the opening scenes (pgs. 5-6) and talk about Dunmore's technical skill as a writer, the way she slips seamlessly from past to present and back again to show the complexity of her characters, the way they exist in the present as sums of their past. What is the effect for the reader of this constant interior movement between past and present as characters plumb their memories and reflect on them?

5. "Over and over, he sees himself rise to take Giles's call." (p. 252) In her fiction Dunmore often writes about life-changing moments, that instance when one action is taken that will irrevocably change the course of a life. Find ways in which she presents the feeling of impending terror, of entrapment, of inevitability for Simon from the moment he agrees to help out Giles Holloway and return a Top Secret file to the office. Could Simon have acted differently? When were the seeds of this moment sown?

6. This secret file lies at the core of the novel, jumpstarting the plot's forward action and destroying the tranquil life that the Callingtons have created for themselves. Look at the ways in which the business of spying, as carried out at the Admiralty, leaches into the fabric of society in this Cold War-era London. How are the Callingtons affected by this on a personal level? On a public? How do their neighbors and work colleague's react to Simon's arrest and subsequent imprisonment?

7. The narrative seethes with personal secrets and hidden life stories. Discuss the element of unknowability that is perhaps inevitable in all human relationships, and find concrete examples within the novel. How far do the characters in the novel truly know each other? To what extent, do they owe an accounting of past lives – as Tolstoy gave his wife-to-be - to those close to them? Or to themselves?

8. Dunmore is masterful in her depiction of details that ground the novel and immerse the reader in a particular time and place – and very much within the lives of her characters. Talk about specific ways in which she does this. How do the details build a concrete historical world?

9. While the novel's outward plot follows Simon's dilemma as an accused spy, how far would you agree that Lily Callington is the central character of this unconventional spy novel?

10. From the beginning of the novel, Lily is portrayed as tending to her garden, her home and her family with hands-on determination and fierce love. Talk about what her "own patch of earth" means to her in the light of her past. Consider her thought that, "The house is a ship, riding the waves high above London. This is what Lily has always told herself at night, when she's afraid and the noise of the city becomes forlorn, even terrifying, as if anything might happen." (p. 182) How do her thoughts about her Muswell Hill house change as the novel progresses?

11. "Bugger this for a game of soldiers, thinks Simon in sudden annoyance. He should be at home, reading Paul's magazine so that the two of them can talk about it over breakfast. He should be listening to the play with Lily." (p. 36). Dunmore presents the Callington family as enjoying a life of simple domestic bliss. Find other examples of this self-contained world they have carefully constructed. How aware are Lily and Simon of its fragility? Discuss the safety and sanctity of home as the central metaphor of the novel, and talk about the ways in which Lily fights to maintain this, especially as she flees to East Knigge with the children.

12. "When he first met Lily, she seemed to fit a place within him that had always been there, waiting for her." (p.83) Discuss Simon's past – his childhood and his time at Cambridge, his relationship with Giles Holloway – and try to come to an understanding of what it is that connects him to Lily.

13. Likewise, with Lily, what draws her to Simon? What makes her say - despite the hardship of raising the children alone in a strange place, despite the long hours in the train to visit him in prison - "Seeing you is the only thing that keeps me going." (p.280) From where does this tender and fierce love spring? Does she ever doubt Simon, or feel irritation with him? Is there a sense that she doesn't truly know him or understand him?

14. Consider Simon's rebellion against his family, his upbringing, and discuss how his rejection of all they stand for has helped, or hindered, him. What do his brothers, with

their entitled, bullying ways, represent within the narrative? Giles Holloway sees the younger Simon as wanting “to tear down a world that was old, soiled, falling apart at its promises” (p. 91) Do you agree with his thoughts?

15. “Lily had lived in fear before she knew why she was afraid.” (p.348) As Cold War tensions strain the collective public nerve, this visceral fear plagues London and surfaces in the Callington household. Talk about the ways the different characters show, and deal with, their fears, real and imagined. Did you feel a real sense of danger in the narrative – for the public, as spy rings surface and nuclear weapons proliferate, and for the Callingtons? How different are Simon and Lily in their reactions? How are the children affected?

16. Giles Holloway’s entire life seems to be a secret, a carefully concocted fiction that befits a double agent but as the novel opens his life begins to unravel. “The art of hiding in plain sight used to be second nature, and now it has become the whole of him.” (p.17) What do you think Dunmore means by this? How does it relate to the novel as a whole?

17. “The briefcase with Giles Holloway’s file in it has entered the house, like a contamination.” (p. 82) How far would you agree that Giles symbolizes the end of an era, the decay in his body representative of the general moral seediness of the Admiralty? What emotions did you feel toward Giles? How did they change, if at all, during his hospital stay and his spiral toward death?

18. “If thou, Lord, should’st mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?” Simon sings this line (from Psalms 130) to his lover Giles, and Giles repeats it in the days before he dies (p.380). What do you think the words mean to Giles? To Simon? Might they apply to other characters?

19. Dunmore often writes about the way war affects people long after the fighting is over. Consider how Lily’s childhood casts a shadow across her entire life, touching her in ways she can barely begin to – or want to - comprehend. Has she reinvented herself anew in any way? Is that possible? How much of her current situation, her fight to save her family, might she have endured if she had lived a different childhood? Or if she were her friend Erica, for example.

20. As Lily flees with her three children to East Knigge, consider the way her children’s lives are paralleling that of her own childhood. In speaking of her assimilation into English life as a child she states, “That was different. It was to fit in, not to hide anything.” How much are she and her children trying to fit in in their new life, and how much are they hiding? Is there a difference?

21. Simon has spent his adult life avoiding the long reach of his past, of his childhood and especially his love for and relationship with Giles. “He didn’t want the past.” (p. 287) “He’d chosen Lily...He’d put his faith in the present, and the future.” (p. 287) What understanding does he come to while in prison (p. 288) and how might that affect his

future? As he reflects on his past in the train he says, “It isn't what you know or don't know: it's what you allow yourself to know.” What does he mean by this?

22. When Lily thinks about the love letter that Simon wrote to Giles, her first instinct is to forget it, to erase the words from her mind as if they were written in German. But then these thoughts follow: “But I do speak German, she thinks. I understand it. I must remember what Simon wrote.” Talk about the importance of this statement in the light of her relationship with Simon, and, also, as it impacts her past, her very way of being.

23. What do you think the future holds for Lily, Simon and their family?

Further Reading:

The Lie – Helen Dunmore, Sweet Tooth – Ian McEwan, A Map of Betrayal – Ha Jin, Mr. Jones – Margaret Sweatman, The Book of Daniel – E.L. Doctorow, The Innocent – Ian McEwan, The Railway Children – Edith Nesbit