

Possession Discussion Questions

- Did you enjoy this book? Why or why not?
- What did you think of this book as a choice for our Postal Museum book club? Do you feel that this book was an appropriate choice for this program? Why or why not?
- What is the significance of the novel's title? Do you think it has more than one meaning? What might it mean for each of the characters?
- Ellen Ash wrote her journal as a "defence against, and a bait for, the gathering of ghouls and vultures." Mortimer Cropper is literally presented as a ghoul, robbing the poet's grave. Beatrice Nest, on the other hand, wishes to preserve Christabel's final letter to Randolph unread. Where is the line, if one exists, between a ghoulish intrusion upon the privacy of the dead, and the potentially legitimate claims of scholarship and history? Does the line change if one is, as Maud is, a descendant of those involved?
- As much as the scholars have discovered, one secret is kept from them at the end and revealed only to the reader. What does this say about our ability to understand the past?
- Why does Byatt use poetry to give away so many clues to the story? Are the poems and stories a necessary and integral part of the novel, or would it have worked just as well without them? Do you find that the poems in the novel succeed in their own right as poetry? What about Christabel's *Tales for Innocents*, of which we read several?
- The scholars in the novel see R. H. Ash as a specifically masculine, and Christabel LaMotte as a specifically feminine, type of poet. Do you feel that such a classification is valid? The scholars are writing in the 1980s – would our view of such distinctions be different today?
- Freedom and autonomy are highly valued both by Christabel and Maud. What does autonomy mean to each of these characters? In Christabel's day, it was difficult for women to attain such autonomy; is it still difficult, in Maud's? What does autonomy mean to Roland? Why does mutual solitude and even celibacy assume a special importance in his relationship with Maud?
- What story does this book tell about the desire to collect and study items from the past?
- Who owns someone's personal object/who should own someone's personal object when they pass?