



## The 19<sup>th</sup> wife

By David Ebershoff

First published 2011

Genre & subject

Historical mystery fiction

First person narratives

Multiple perspectives

### Synopsis

The story of Ann Eliza Young's crusade against polygamy intertwines with a tale of murder involving a polygamist family in present-day Utah.

### Author biography

David Ebershoff is an American writer, editor, and teacher. His debut novel, *The Danish Girl*, was adapted into an Academy Award-winning film of the same name in 2015, while his third novel, *The 19th Wife*, was adapted into a television movie of the same name in 2010.

Ebershoff has taught writing at NYU and Princeton, and currently teaches literature in the MFA program at Columbia University.

### Discussion starters

- The first part of the novel, "Two Wives," contains prefaces to two very different books. What did you think when you started reading *The 19th Wife*? Which story interested you the most?
- Ann Eliza Young says, "Faith is a mystery." How does Ebershoff play with this metaphor? What are the mysteries in *The 19th Wife*? What does the novel say about faith?
- What are your impressions of Ann Eliza Young, and how do those impressions change over the course of the novel? Do you trust her as a narrator?
- Brigham Young was one of the most dynamic and complex figures in nineteenth-century America. How does the novel portray him? Do you come to understand his deep convictions? In the story of his marriage to Ann Eliza, he essentially gets the last word. Why?
- What kind of man is Chauncey Webb? And Gilbert? What do they tell you about polygamy? And about faith?

- Jordan is an unlikely detective. What makes him a good sleuth? What are his blind spots?
- Many of the people who help Jordan—Mr. Heber, Maureen, Kelly, and Tom—are Mormons. What do you think Ebershoff is saying by this?
- Like many mysteries, Jordan's story is a quest. What is he searching for?
- Why do you think Ebershoff wrote the novel with so many voices? How do the voices play off one another? Who is your favourite narrator? And your least favourite?
- Why do you think Ebershoff wrote a fictional memoir by Ann Eliza Young, and why are some chapters missing? As he says in his Author's Note, the real Ann Eliza Young actually wrote two memoirs: *Wife No. 19*, first published in 1875, and *Life in Mormon Bondage*, which came out in 1908. Based on your reading of *The 19th Wife*, what kind of memoirist do you think the real Ann Eliza Young was?
- One reviewer has said *The 19th Wife* is "that rare book that effortlessly explicates and entertains all at once." Do you agree? How does the novel manage this balance?
- Were you surprised by how the stories of Ann Eliza and Jordan come together? At what point were you able to see the connection?
- Does Jordan's story end as you hoped it would? Does it end as Jordan hoped it would?
- What do you think ultimately happened to Ann Eliza Young?

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*The Bishop's Wife* by Ivie Mette.



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