

Book Club Discussion Questions

Captive of the Labyrinth: Sarah L. Winchester, Heiress to the Rifle Fortune

by Mary Jo Ignoffo

1. Sarah Winchester's persona is the result of her wealth, her reclusiveness, her strange house, and a long and successful advertising campaign of a tourist attraction. If you had heard of her before reading *Captive of the Labyrinth*, what was your perception of her? What did you find most surprising about Sarah Winchester? Has your perception changed?
2. The author explains (page 9) that for several generations the bread-winners in Sarah Winchester's family had been woodworkers or joiners. "Sarah . . . also possessed the Pardee appreciation for woodworking." Do you think Winchester may have lived out her life differently if her ancestors had been from the working class as laborers or from the upper class as financiers? What other Pardee ancestral traits did Sarah Winchester display?
3. When Sarah Pardee married William Winchester, he was the heir-apparent to a successful shirt manufactory. Do you think their lives may have been different if he stayed with the shirt factory, or do you think things would have turned out about the same?
4. "...under Oliver Winchester's roof, Sarah, absorbed life lessons in interior design, construction management, real estate investment, and financial strategy." Sarah was very astute and progressive for her time. How would her financial skills play out in today's world?
5. Sarah and William were married for almost 19 years when she became a widow. Twenty-eight years later she contributed over \$1 Million to the New Haven Hospital (Yale-New Haven Hospital) in his memory. This was an extremely generous donation for its time and even by today's standards. As the author states, this legacy is relatively unknown. Why do you think this so few know about this?
6. What was Sarah Winchester's sense of family, and how was it displayed in her relationships with sisters, nieces or nephews, in-laws, and heirs? Sarah's family members were beneficiaries of her ongoing generosity. Do you think they took advantage of this? Overall, what do you think of the way she dealt with money and family members?
7. Sarah's lawyer, Frank Leib was employed and associated with "...eccentric and peculiar people", yet was also a mainstream professional with a side business in fruit orcharding. What do you think of his business demeanor? How did he see his role in Winchester's life?
8. Did the author's exploration of spiritualism persuade you that Sarah Winchester was probably not a practicing spiritualist? Do you have a better understanding of spiritualism?
9. Sarah Winchester is most often portrayed as a superstitious, crazy woman. Is this a part of the yellow journalism era and advertising for a tourist spot? Or is Winchester herself responsible for these conclusions?