



The Virgin Cure by Ami McKay

About the author:

Ami McKay's debut novel, *The Birth House* was a # 1 bestseller in Canada, winner of three CBA Libris Awards, nominated for the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, and a book club favourite around the world. Her new novel, *The Virgin Cure*, is inspired by the life of her great- great grandmother, Dr. Sarah Fonda Mackintosh, a female physician in nineteenth century New York. Born and raised in Indiana, Ami now lives in Nova Scotia.

Source: Author's website (<http://www.amimckay.com>)

About this book:

"I am Moth, a girl from the lowest part of Chrystie Street, born to a slum-house mystic and the man who broke her heart." So begins *The Virgin Cure*, a novel set in the tenements of lower Manhattan in the year 1871. As a young child, Moth's father smiled, tipped his hat and walked away from her forever. The summer she turned twelve, her mother sold her as a servant to a wealthy woman, with no intention of ever seeing her again.

These betrayals lead Moth to the wild, murky world of the Bowery, filled with house-thieves, pickpockets, beggars, sideshow freaks and prostitutes, where eventually she meets Miss Everett, the owner of a brothel simply known as "The Infant School." Miss Everett caters to gentlemen who pay dearly for companions who are "willing and clean," and the most desirable of them all are young virgins like Moth.

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Through the friendship of Dr. Sadie, a female physician, Moth learns to question and observe the world around her, where her new friends are falling prey to the myth of the “virgin cure”—that deflowering a “fresh maid” can heal the incurable and tainted. She knows the law will not protect her, that polite society ignores her, and still she dreams of answering to no one but herself. There’s a high price for such independence, though, and no one knows that better than a girl from Chrystie Street.

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Discussion Questions:

1. Miss Everett could be seen as doing work that “saves” girls, whether from poverty or from working the streets, and she is an established member of New York society. What do you think of this argument, considering the few options for young girls like Moth?
2. What makes Moth such a survivor? Is she better or worse off without her mother?
3. The young Moth spends a lot of time fantasizing about the lives of the wealthy and how her life could have been different. Do Moth’s early experiences with the Wentworths dispel some of those fantasies, or shore them up?
4. Moth’s mother tells Mrs. Wentworth that Moth’s name is “Miss Fenwick.” Later, Moth chooses to use the name “Ada” while she’s in the brothel. How do these and other names change the way Moth sees herself? How does calling herself “Ada” help her to cope?
5. How does Ami McKay use mystery and hidden secrets in *The Virgin Cure*? For instance, consider the various characters who live secret lives, or the importance of fortune-telling, or the role of the old Stuyvesant pear tree in the lives of early immigrants.



6. Most of the girls in Miss Everett's house believe their lives can only improve if they win the continued affection of one of her rich clients. Dr. Sadie ensures that this doesn't happen for Moth by taking her to visit Katherine Tully. Why do you think Miss Everett lets Moth go along with the doctor for the day?
7. What sorts of sacrifices does Dr. Sadie have to make in her work and her life?
8. Discuss the title of this novel and the different ways it relates to the story within its pages. Discuss the devastating myth of the "virgin cure" – not only how it took hold in the New York of this novel, but how it continues today in parts of our world.
9. What character in this novel intrigues you the most, and why?
10. Throughout the novel, McKay uses elements like Dr. Sadie's diary, margin notes and newspaper ads to convey information, whether about her characters or more generally about the New York of the day. Talk about the effect these parts of the narrative had on your reading, and your experience of Moth's world.
11. Reread the *Evening Star* article that appears just before the novel's epilogue – a report on the debut of the Circassian Beauty at Dink's Museum. Compare the exotic story about her past with what really happened to Moth.
12. At the end of the novel Moth lives in a home on Gramercy Park and seems to have reached her life-long goal – yet she's only nineteen. What do you think the future holds for Moth?

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