

What Is Visible

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Reading Group Guide

1. How did reading WHAT IS VISIBLE affect your ideas about sensory perception. Have you ever tried to imagine what it would be like to live with only one sense?
2. How did the multiple narrators featured in the book—Laura, Julia, Dr. Howe, Sarah—impact the storytelling for you? Who was your favorite narrator? Who was your least favorite? How would the story have been different if only one character told it?
3. How did the knowledge that WHAT IS VISIBLE is based on historical fact influence your reading of the novel? How do you think fictionalizing a life, or writing a book “based” on a real historical person, influences our understanding of that character and their life and times?
4. Since Laura cannot see, what do you think the title, WHAT IS VISIBLE, might mean?
5. How did you feel about Laura’s occasional violence toward her teachers? At what point or points throughout the book could you empathize with Laura? When did you feel the most estranged from her thoughts and behavior?
6. Julia Ward Howe had a fairly unsympathetic relationship with the blind students at Perkins, and Laura in particular, for most of the book. Do you feel, however, that over the course of the book that Julia genuinely changed and grew and became a more sympathetic character?
7. Did you find Dr. Howe to be a likable character? If not, why not? Why do think he left Laura \$2,000 in his will, and left his wife nothing? Did this surprise you?
8. Although Laura could not see, she was very concerned with her own concept of “appearance.” How did Laura’s appearance impact her life? Do you think that if Laura had been allowed to get glass eyes, as Helen Keller did, that her life would have been different?
9. Laura’s religion was deeply important to her. But how did her choice of religion contribute to her fall from grace, and even from history?
10. When she’s baptized, Laura believes she can see underwater for that one miraculous moment. What do you think about the possibility of such a miracle?
11. What do you really think Dr. Howe’s feelings were about Charles Sumner and Sumner’s about him? Does Sumner ultimately emerge as a sympathetic character?
12. Sarah Wight decided to stay with Edward Bond and even bear his children after finding out that he had syphilis. Do you feel she made the right choice? Do you think she regretted it?
13. Dr. Howe refused to take money to finance a lifelong teacher and companion after Sarah Wight was dismissed. Do you believe, as Helen Keller said, that if Laura had had her own Annie Sullivan that she would have “outshone” Helen and been remembered for her accomplishments?

14. Why do you think Laura engaged in self-cutting?

15. Laura claimed that she had actually regained her sense of taste temporarily. Do you think this was true or that it was wishful thinking—or perhaps a need to please Kate?

16. In the end, it is revealed that Dr. Howe was having an affair with Kate at the same time that Laura was. Were you surprised to find out that the baby was his? How did Laura's misconception in thinking the baby was hers illuminate her skewed understanding of how things work in the world?

17. Consider Dr. Howe's involvement with the Secret Six in financing John Brown's campaign, ultimately leading to the massacre at Harper's Ferry. Do you think that Dr. Howe was right to finance Brown as an expression of his fervent abolitionism?

18. *WHAT IS VISIBLE* tells of how Helen Keller was chosen from a photograph to be "the second Laura Bridgman," and about how Helen was given glass eyes—a secret that was kept from the public during her lifetime. Has the book changed the way you view Helen Keller or Annie Sullivan?

19. How would you answer the question Laura asks Helen that begins and ends the novel: which sense would you most treasure?