



BOOK CLUB KIT

Questions

FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 What do you think of the author's choice to begin the story with John Wilkes Booth's death and end it with Lucy's point of view? Did this authorial choice make the assassin's story more poignant for you?
- 2 What do you think of Junius's unconventional views on marriage as "lifelong enslavement" and an "iron yoke that crushes all who submit to it"? How does this compare to his abolitionist views?
- 3 When Junius decides to elope to America with Mary Ann, he tells her that "Americans are individualists, tolerant and free-thinking. They wouldn't care." How has this view of Americans withstood the test of time?
- 4 While Junius spirals into alcoholism, Mary Ann feels she might "burst from the strain of repressing her anger and disappointment. . . . She would not become a shrew, complaining and criticizing . . . Their home must remain his safe haven, free of judgment and recriminations, or he might grow despondent and decide not to return to it." Discuss the roles of wives during the early nineteenth century.
- 5 Why do you think Mary Ann destroys Junius's letters? What about them makes her want to destroy these personal relics from her husband's past?
- 6 John is heavily inspired by his father's writings that "fame and glory are marvelous prizes." How does John change after the death of his father, the strongest advocate of abolitionism he had known, while he became a Confederate sympathizer? Was there always a potential for John to follow the path he chose, or would things have been different had his father, and his influence, not died prematurely?
- 7 Introverted and meek Edwin becomes a legendary stage actor by accident whereas Booth eagerly strives to become one. Booth also often finds himself overshadowed and at odds with Edwin. Compare and contrast the two brothers, their personalities, acting careers, and political beliefs.
- 8 Booth is strongly against Asia's marrying Clarke. Why do you think he was so protective of his younger sister? Do you think his misgivings were later found to be true? Why or why not?
- 9 What other options did Asia have aside from marrying Clarke? Discuss the role of young women in society during the mid-nineteenth century.
- 10 Booth sympathized with the character of Brutus from *Julius Caesar*. How do you think Booth's love of theater and drama influenced, *if at all*, his decision to assassinate Lincoln?
- 11 Compare and contrast the lives and hardships of widows Mary Ann Booth and Mary Surratt and their abiding love for their children, including their troubled sons.
- 12 Mary conspired with Booth, Herold, Atzerodt, and Powell to kidnap the president. However, when Booth assassinated Lincoln, she denied culpability. In what ways do you agree or disagree with the sentence that was given to her for housing the conspirators?
- 13 How has your viewpoint of John Wilkes Booth changed after reading this book? In what ways do you find him more of a sympathetic figure? In what ways does he still perform his historically accepted role as a villain?



They Loved the Assassin

**PROFILES OF MARY ANN BOOTH,
ASIA BOOTH CLARKE, LUCY HALE, AND MARY SURRATT**



WHO WAS MARY ANN BOOTH?

Mary Ann was a beautiful Covent Garden flower girl and an admirer of the great Junius Brutus Booth, one of the most celebrated Shakespearean actors in England. Although Junius was married, he and Mary Ann fell deeply in love, and they fled to America to start a new life together. Mary Ann was a loyal and devoted partner to the tempestuous, eccentric Junius, and a loving, nurturing mother to their ten children, four of whom tragically perished to childhood illnesses. She knew it was wrong to have a favorite child, but she couldn't help adoring the charming, handsome John Wilkes Booth most of all.



WHO WAS ASIA BOOTH CLARKE?

Asia was John Wilkes Booth's older sister and confidante. Clever, well-read, and a gifted writer, she watched over her younger brother from the time he was an angry boy defending their mother's honor in fistfights with neighborhood bullies to the years when he struggled to follow in their revered father's footsteps by becoming a successful actor. In turn, Booth charmed her out of her dark moods and was steadfastly protective of her, going without food in hard times so that she, the eldest sister, and their mother would have enough to eat and trying in vain to prevent her marriage to a fellow stage actor he suspected did not love her but wanted only to benefit from the Booth family name. Though their political beliefs were often at odds, Asia loved her brother dearly even as she grew increasingly worried about his explosive outbursts and hatred of President Abraham Lincoln.



WHO WAS LUCY HALE?

Lucy Hale was charming, pretty, intelligent, and very popular in social circles both in Washington, DC, and in her native state of New Hampshire. The younger daughter of the abolitionist Senator John Parker Hale, Lucy was staunchly loyal to her family and to the Union, and she highly esteemed President Lincoln and was close friends with his eldest son, Robert. She had admired John Wilkes Booth from the first time she had seen him perform on the stage, and when they met in the capital in the waning months of the war, she quickly fell in love, and Booth gave her every reason to believe he felt the same. While Booth's unexplained travels and secretiveness occasionally provoked her to doubt and worry, she never suspected his involvement in the Confederate cause.



WHO WAS MARY SURRATT?

Mary Surratt owned a boarding house in Washington, DC, where Booth met with his fellow conspirators, including her own beloved son. Mary was intensely loyal to the Confederate cause and admired Booth for his strong beliefs, even as he put her family in increasing danger. While historians debate how deeply she was involved in the conspiracy to assassinate Lincoln, there is no doubt that she had kept a safe house for Confederate spies and smugglers before coming to Washington. Whether she was truly guilty, innocent, or something in between, she was implicated in the assassination plot and became the first woman to be executed by the United States federal government.

Further Reading

A DELETED SCENE FROM *FATES AND TRAITORS*

JENNIFER CHIAVERINI NOTES: “In 1825, Junius Brutus Booth decided to go on tour in England, not only to prove himself to skeptical theater critics but also to make a long-overdue visit to his estranged wife and eldest son. Mary Ann and their children accompanied him on the overseas journey, but an already difficult situation was complicated by the need to keep their relationship secret. I described the Booth family’s trip to England in an earlier version of *Fates and Traitors*, but while I was revising the manuscript, I wavered about whether to keep the scenes. I thought they offered a fascinating glimpse into Junius’s desire to be considered the greatest tragedian of the age and into Mary Ann’s relationship with her mother, but I was concerned that they diverted too much attention from the main narrative. Also, John Wilkes Booth wasn’t born yet, and I worried that at this point, readers might be getting impatient for him to appear. In the end I decided to cut the scenes for the sake of the narrative flow, but I still consider them helpful in understanding Junius, Mary Ann, and their complex relationship.”

JUNIUS BRUTUS BOOTH RETURNS TO LONDON

September 1825–June 1826

EVERY YEAR BROUGHT NEW IMPROVEMENTS TO THEIR homestead, and every year Junius’s fame as the greatest tragedian of the age grew—as did their family. Rosalie, gentle and quiet, was born in 1823, followed by another son, Henry Byron, in 1825, both arriving with remarkable regularity and ease, thanks to the skilled midwives who attended their deliveries.

Mary Ann knew implicitly that Junius loved her, adored their children, and enjoyed the work of The Farm, but although he professed complete satisfaction with his life, she did not believe he was entirely content. Sometimes she found him brooding over reports of the triumphs of his old rival, Edmund Kean, on the London stage, and she knew it chafed at him that many English critics had never considered him Kean’s equal, and now he was too far away to prove them wrong. Sometimes too a shadow of grief would darken his expression as he watched the children play, and she knew he was thinking of his firstborn son, whom he had last seen as a toddler and who was now, according to Adelaide’s letters, an intelligent, dutiful lad of six years of age.

Adelaide had repeatedly urged Junius to keep his promise and return home for a long-overdue visit, and occasionally Junius mused aloud about the benefits and hazards of conceding. Every time he did Mary Ann froze, full of dread, until he answered his own question with a list of reasons why it would be impossible for him to make the journey: The theater season would begin soon, or had too recently ended. Mary Ann was in a delicate condition, or had not long ago given birth. He had to supervise planting at The Farm or harvesting or the construction of a new cider press. To Mary Ann’s relief, he always came up with a reliable excuse on his own, sparing her the indignity of begging him to stay.

Then, early in 1825, news broke in the American papers that for nearly four years Edmund Kean had been engaged in an adulterous affair with an alderman’s wife. The sordid details had been exposed in the courts, where the lord chief justice ruled in favor of the cuckolded alderman. The press and the public pounced with vicious glee upon the once-beloved actor, ravaging him in caustic editorials, disrupting his performances by shouting lines from his indecent love letters, and belting out lewd ballads about his escapades in the streets and pubs of London. Even in the provinces Kean could not escape the scandal; rural audiences, too, jeered and mocked and threw orange peels and rubbish on the stage.

“That could have been me,” Junius admitted, shaken with every new report. “That could have been us.”

Despite his relief at having narrowly escaped disgrace himself, Junius nevertheless saw in Kean’s social and professional ruin an opportunity to claim the erstwhile favorite’s laurels. By spring he had resolved to return to England for a series of engagements after Mary Ann’s child was safely delivered.

“I am returning to the London stage, not to Adelaide,” he assured her, repeatedly and emphatically. “You must come with me, you and all the children. You can see your mother.”

“I don’t want to give her false hope,” said Mary Ann. Years before she had responded to her mother’s first letter to express her sorrow over her father’s death, but also to tell her, gently and firmly, that Junius was not her seducer but her dearest love, and she had no intention of forsaking him. In every letter since, her mother had sent more heartfelt pleas to repent and return home, to which Mary Ann replied with pleasant, sunny news about the children and The Farm. Their parallel correspondences, traveling along different planes and never

meeting, offered little opportunity and even less hope for a sincere, heartfelt conversation that might lead to forgiveness. Mary Ann was not sure whether her mother would even let her cross the threshold of her childhood home without renouncing the father of her children.

Sure enough, after Henry Byron entered the world and Mary Ann wrote to inform her mother of Junius's plans, Sarah expressed guarded joy but made it clear that Junius would not be welcome in her home. So after the family's ship landed in Liverpool—where they encountered on the wharf none other than Edmund Kean himself, wretched, miserable, and embarking upon an American tour in hopes of escaping scandal and poverty—Junius escorted Mary Ann and the children to London, where he saw them off at Lambeth before heading to the West End alone.

A year after her husband's death Sarah had sold the seed shop and had taken a small flat near Mary Ann's childhood home. Mary Ann had prepared to find her mother living in dignified poverty, but her new home was quiet, charming, and scrupulously clean, with window boxes flourishing with bright posies. Sarah greeted her daughter with a tearful embrace and silent admonitions, her grandchildren with forced smiles and tentative kisses. Her hair, Mary Ann was shocked to discover, once as black and glossy as her own, had turned completely white.

"I've told my friends you went to America to seek your fortune," Sarah told her that night after Mary Ann put the children to bed. "I told them you married an Anglican minister."

Mary Ann had never known her mother to lie. "Then that's what I'll say if anyone asks."

"You understand now why he may not visit us." Apparently Sarah could not even speak Junius's name. "His face is too well known, even after all these years."

Mary Ann managed a smile to show that she understood. "It's good to see you, Mother," she said, reaching across the table to take her hand.

Sarah said nothing, but she offered a tremulous smile and squeezed her daughter's hand in return.

While Junius portrayed Brutus, Richard III, and Othello at Drury Lane, Mary Ann tried to overcome her mother's bitter disappointment by nurturing her affection for June, Rosalie, and Henry Byron. Sarah was unfailingly kind to them, deliberately refusing to blame them for their parents' sins, but as the weeks passed, she remained unnaturally timid and watchful around her grandchildren, as if she wanted desperately to love them but expected they might at any moment sprout horns, spiked tails, and bat's wings. The first time Sarah referred to Junius's return to London as his return to his wife, Mary Ann ignored it, but the next time she tersely corrected her. "He isn't staying in his wife's flat," she added emphatically, "but in his father's house with his sister Jane and her family."

"Oh, daughter." Her mother regarded her pityingly. "They're married. She hasn't seen her husband in years. Do

you really think that after spending the day together—sharing meals, reminiscing, watching their son, going out in society—they part with a polite handshake at the door?"

Mary Ann did not know what to say to that, or hardly what to think. She and Junius met every few days at inconspicuous places far from Sarah's home and theaters where Junius would be easily recognized, and nothing in his manner suggested he had become intimate with Adelaide or wanted to. She knew he had commissioned a portrait of himself, Adelaide, and Richard together, but she could hardly complain, since two years before Junius had arranged—at great expense—for her to sit for the acclaimed artist Thomas Sully, portraitist to Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Andrew Jackson. She also knew that Junius spent almost every evening performing, and he complained about Jane's rude husband and unruly children so frequently that he undoubtedly resided with them. Most telling of all, if he were not truly devoted to Mary Ann and their children, he would have left them back in Maryland.

She could not bear to trouble him with timid, faithless questions, not only because she refused to entertain her mother's fears, but also because Junius's London performances, far from winning him the great acclaim he had so long sought, had met with indifference from some critics and derision from others. The *London Times* accused him of taking advantage of Edmund Kean's disgrace to seize his throne in the hierarchy of players and predicted that he would fail, as the propensity to rant was the most striking feature of his performances. The *Morning Herald* reported that the applause following Junius's opening night at Drury Lane was merely moderate, and opined, "He does not seem to be at all improved by his transatlantic expedition." Junius's delivery was marked by extravagance, the *Morning Post* chimed in, "and excepting a few points, the performance exhibited nothing of the power of genius, or the discrimination of judgment." Worse yet—infinately worse—the *London Sunday Monitor* accused him of "seducing from the roof of a father an infatuated girl to follow a traitorous husband to another quarter of the world, leaving a wife and offspring as objects of professional charity."

Mary Ann waited, terrified, for other newspapers to take up the scandal, but miraculously, none did. And yet how could she burden Junius with suspicious questions about his fidelity while scornful critics hurled such invective?

She was not surprised when Junius grew discouraged with the London press and decided to make a tour of the provinces—Liverpool, Brighton, Manchester, Sheffield, Bristol, and Dublin. Adelaide did not accompany him, but instead took her son to visit her mother in Brussels. Mary Ann seized upon their voluntary separation as proof that it was a marriage of convenience and nothing more, but Sarah remained unconvinced.

In April, Junius returned from his tour and opened at London's Royalty Theatre in the role of Richard III, but later

that same night, fireworks stored in the basement of the theater ignited and the entire building burned to the ground—taking Junius’s trunks of beautiful costumes with it.

Stunned, Mary Ann absorbed the terrible news as an almost physical blow. Junius’s wardrobe had been worth hundreds of dollars in furs, silks, satins, and jewels—but more than that, it represented years of her painstaking labor. And of course, without costumes, an actor could not work. As Junius and the other players formerly employed by the Royalty scrambled to find new engagements, Mary Ann set herself to the task of replacing what had been lost.

From the moment Junius’s purchases of silks, satins, and fur trim were delivered to her mother’s home, Mary Ann quickly designed and cut and sewed one garment after another, well aware that the family’s finances depended upon Junius’s performing. She began with the costumes he wanted immediately—Hamlet, Shylock, Othello, Macbeth—deferring attire for the other roles in his repertoire until after he returned to the stage. She wished her mother, who had a fine hand with the needle, would offer to help, but although Sarah did not complain as her once tidy home began to resemble a workshop, she would not sew a single stitch for Junius’s benefit. “I cannot bring myself to contribute to any artifice of his,” she replied tightly when Mary Ann, increasingly frantic and exhausted, finally broke down and asked for her help. “His acting has caused me the greatest suffering of my life. I cannot help him disguise who he truly is, even for the pretense of the theater.”

Sarah did concede to watch the children while Mary Ann cut and sewed and turned out costumes at a frenetic pace. Sarah cooked and cleaned and cared for them all so that Mary Ann could care for Junius, but she refused to do anything to help him directly.

It was enough, Mary Ann reminded herself. It was more than either she or Junius deserved for breaking her heart.

Shortly after his thirtieth birthday, Junius departed for an engagement at the German theater in Amsterdam. By the time he returned to London in June for three performances at the Royal Coburg, Mary Ann had finished all but the fine details of his costumes for Richard III and King Lear. Though not up to her usual standards of elegance, they would do until she had time to complete them on the long voyage home.

For Junius, discouraged by the perpetual contempt of English critics, the indifference of English audiences, and the bad luck that seemed to hang over him with the same gloomy persistence of London fog, he had decided that they would set sail for Baltimore as soon as he could book passage. One other impetus compelled him: Mary Ann was once again expecting a child, and Junius, disillusioned with the land of his own birth, was determined that his newest son or daughter would be born on American soil.

Only once, as Mary Ann prepared for the long ocean voyage, did her mother try to persuade her to stay. “This is your chance, daughter,” she pleaded. “It may be your last chance. Let him sail to America alone. Forget him and raise your children as Englishmen and -women. Only sorrow will come from this unnatural union.”

“I love Junius,” Mary Ann told her, wishing she could soothe her mother’s anguish. “We’ve been blessed with a beautiful family. We’re happy. There’s no reason why we shouldn’t continue to be so.”

“There’s every reason,” her mother insisted, but Mary Ann could see in her eyes that she knew the cause was lost.

Did you know?

- Booth was in love with and secretly engaged to Lucy Hale, the daughter of a Union and abolitionist U.S. senator—she was wholly unaware of Booth’s Southern sympathies and animosity toward Lincoln.
- John Wilkes Booth and his two elder brothers became actors like their father, the renowned Junius Brutus Booth, but John Wilkes received no better than mixed reviews throughout his career. It was his elder brother Edwin who was considered the true heir of their father’s talent.
- The original conspiracy involved kidnapping Lincoln and bringing him to the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia, demanding either peace or the release of Confederate soldiers as a ransom. Booth enlisted six Southern sympathizers in this plan.
- After the assassination of Lincoln, Booth had expected to be hailed as a hero of the South and was surprised to find his actions almost universally condemned.
- As a boy, Booth crudely tattooed his initials onto the back of his left hand with India ink, a permanent mark that was later used to identify his remains.