

# JENNIFER CHIAVERINI

## CANARY GIRLS

### Reading Group Discussion Questions

1. *Canary Girls* is told from the perspectives of three women from very different walks of life: April, a former housemaid; Lucy, the wife of an architect and devoted mother of two young sons; and Helen, an intellectual suffragette recently married to a wealthy industrialist. Which of the three did you most identify with and why? What other characters did you find especially memorable?
2. If not for their wartime service, April, Lucy, and Helen likely never would have crossed paths, much less become friends. What reasons did each one have for going to work at Thornshire Arsenal? Compare and contrast their motives and what they hoped to accomplish.
3. *Canary Girls* describes several tactics that were used to recruit soldiers and munitions workers, including the widespread distribution of posters, Lord Kitchener's "Pals battalions," and the Order of the White Feather. What do you think of these various strategies? Were they acceptable given the urgent need? Did they ever go too far?
4. The munitionettes at Thornshire Arsenal were united in their determination to do their bit to help Great Britain win the war. Even so, longstanding class distinctions sometimes created tension or even strife in the workplace. Recall, for example, how an affronted April responded to Lucy's fine clothes and politeness when Lucy accidentally jostled her in the shifting house. Where else in the novel does social class create conflict?
5. How did the Thornshire Arsenal's football club, the Thornshire Canaries, help women find common ground despite the teammates' differences in age, background, and social class?
6. Thornshire Arsenal took many precautions to reduce the risk of explosions, but they were unprepared to deal with the toxic effects of trinitrotoluene (TNT). After medical studies concluded that the yellow powder caused serious illnesses and even death, what measures did arsenals take to improve worker safety? Did they do all that they could, in your opinion, or should more have been done? Can you think of any parallels to other hazardous workplace incidents in labor history?
7. Why did the British government forbid the press to report about explosions at munitions factories? Do you believe this was the right decision?
8. After the war, should the munitionettes have been permitted to keep their factory jobs, or should they willingly have stepped aside for the returning veterans?
9. In her Author's Note, Jennifer Chiaverini explains that despite its remarkably successful debut, women's professional football was essentially banned in the UK after the Great War until the 1970s. How did you feel when you learned this? How has gender equity in sports improved since the Canary Girls took the pitch, and where is significant improvement still needed?