

The Cruel Ever After Readers' Guide

The shock that Minneapolis restaurateur Jane Lawless is in for when Chester Garrity returns to a city that he swore he'd never see again is nothing compared to Chester's own. He's currently penniless, or as he would prefer to say, between fortunes. He's working an angle to make his next one by selling a priceless artifact recently looted from the Baghdad Museum, but it all falls through when he wakes up next to the dead body of his buyer with no memory of what happened the night before. Panicked, Chester flees the scene, eventually returning to cover his tracks only to find that someone has already taken care of that for him. But at what price?

Starting Points for Discussion

1. In this mystery, Hart offers several different examples of the aftermath of a once-solid love relationship. Discuss this in relation to Irina and her husband, Steve. Irina and her relationship with Chess. Jane and Julia. And though not a true marriage, Jane and her affection for Chess. Are all of these part of the thread of "the cruel ever after?"
2. Do you feel that Jane was too gullible when she married Chess? Were her reasons honorable, or were they mostly financial? What would you have done given the same set of circumstances?
3. In the book, Chess muses on his connection to ancient antiquity. He thinks to himself, "Going backward in time had always appealed to him far more than going forward. All his curiosity centered on the ancient, which was science fiction enough." How did this factor in to his ultimate demise?
4. Julia Martinsen is a manipulator. She's also a doctor, who wants to help the sick, the poor, the needy. Can a person be both? Is she more good or bad?
5. Julia believes in fate, when it comes to romantic affairs. She thinks she and Jane are fated to be together. Do you think she and Jane will ever get together again? Does Jane have anything to fear from Julia?
6. Many of the characters in this book are keeping secrets. Can you name some of them? Is not telling the truth the same as a lie?
7. A number of comments in the book point to the question of who owns ancient antiquities. When Chess give Jane a Roman snake ring from the second century B.C.E, he says, "I wore it for a while. Now I'm passing it on to you. It's just stuff, Jane. Old stuff, for sure, but stuff nonetheless. Nobody owns an antiquity. It just gets passed around." Jane later discovers this: "Most reputable museums actually own stolen artifacts. The concept of 'provenance' appears to be tricky--and murky--when you're dealing with something that ancient. Museums are generally wary of tighter laws because

they feel those laws would drive art antiquities underground--into the hands of private collectors. Cultural sensitivity notwithstanding, the black market is apparently booming.” So who owns these ancient artifacts? Who owns the Winged Bull of Nimrud? The Iraqi people? The museum it might end up in one day?

8. Do you think Jane will ever accept Nolan’s offer to come work with him and get her own P.I. license?
9. As a seasoned mystery reader, you probably knew Lee, the preacher, wasn’t entirely on the up and up. Did you peg him as one of the cabal? If so, when in the book?
10. Jane’s family and friends are important to her. Her father, her brother and his wife, her niece, Cordelia, and Cordelia’s niece...and now, Nolan. Some of these people were part of the early books. Some are new. How does Jane’s love of her family and friends, and her commitment to them, shape her character?
11. How will the abduction of Peter and Sigrid’s daughter, Mia, change their relationship? Or will it have no effect at all?
12. If *The Cruel Ever After* were made into a movie, who would play Jane? Cordelia? Chess? Irina? Julia? Nolan?