



ECSTASY

MARY SHARRATT

A NOVEL OF KLIMT'S MUSE AND MAHLER'S GREATEST LOVE:
ALMA MAHLER, THE WOMAN WHOSE LIFE WOULD DEFINE AND DEFEY AN ERA

BOOK DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Did you know anything about Alma Mahler before you read this novel? If so, what opinion did you have of her before you read *Ecstasy*? Did this book change your view? How did Mary Sharratt's portrayal of Alma differ from that of other books you've read or from films you've seen?
2. Young Alma Schindler comes of age in the glittering hotbed of turn-of-the-twentieth century Vienna—birthplace of radical new art. Her first love is none other than Gustav Klimt. Alma yearns to make her mark as a composer. What hurdles and opposition does she face as an ambitious woman in this era?



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3. Early 1900s Vienna is cosmopolitan and sophisticated, but it's also a place of deep-seated, culturally ingrained antisemitism and misogyny. What shadows do these two forms of bigotry and hatred cast on the characters in the novel?
4. Under the tutelage of her mentor and lover, Alexander von Zemlinsky, Alma has made great progress with her music and has drafted the beginnings of an opera. Then she meets the great composer Gustav Mahler at a dinner party. She and Gustav fall deeply in love, but he demands that she give up her music as a condition of their marriage. Torn by her love and in awe of his genius, she reluctantly consents. Why do you think she agreed to this despite the heartbreak it caused her? Why did she choose Mahler over Zemlinsky, who would have supported her development as a composer?
5. Gustav Mahler's friends are horrified when they discover he intends to marry Alma, nineteen years his junior. They view her as a frivolous socialite, unworthy of him. Likewise, Zemlinsky tries to persuade Alma that this match is ill-advised. If you were Alma or Gustav's friend, what advice would you have given? Do you think they were mismatched?
6. How do Alma and Gustav change and grow during the course of their life together? How does Alma cope, now that she is forbidden to compose? What repercussions does this have on their marriage? Do you see any similarities between Alma's plight and that of other accomplished women who set aside their careers and ambitions for marriage?
7. While Alma has sacrificed her music for marriage, her friend, Ilse Conrat, perseveres with her creative career and goes on to become a renowned sculptor. Why do you think Ilse succeeded in fully realizing her artistic ambitions, despite the double prejudice that she faced, as both a woman and a Jew? When Alma follows Gustav to New York, she meets other high-achieving women, including Natalie Curtis, ethnomusicologist, composer, and activist, and Mary Seney Sheldon, the first president of the New York Philharmonic. How does encountering these women in New York alter the course of Alma's life?
8. What do you think of Alma's affair with Walter Gropius? Why do you think he sent a love letter to Alma in an envelope addressed to Gustav? How does Gustav's discovery of the affair change their marriage? Do you feel more sympathy with Gustav or Alma at this point in the story?
9. Having read this novel, what do you make of Alma's character? Do you see her as a "bad woman," as some biographers and Mahler fans have done? What's your opinion on Alma? Can you identify with her as a character? Or are you repelled by her? What do you think of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's observation that well-behaved women seldom make history? Do you think we'd still be talking about Alma today if she had behaved herself?

10. Tom Lehrer's famous "Alma Song" (you can listen to the original 1965 recording here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QL6KgbrGSKQ>) begs the question:

Alma, tell us.

All modern women are jealous.

Which of your magical wands

Got you Gustav and Walter and Franz?

As Lehrer points out, Alma married—or had affairs with—some of the greatest creative geniuses of her time. Why do you think these men were drawn to her? What was her secret? What do you think of the title of this novel, *Ecstasy*? What ecstasies does Alma experience and impart on those around her?

11. If you were to talk with the author, what would you want to know? Mary Sharratt enjoys chatting with book clubs. Contact Mary via her website (marysharratt.com) or her Facebook Author Page (<https://www.facebook.com/Mary-Sharratt-960515374037848/>) to see if you can set up a Skype book group visit.

12. Have you read Mary's other books? How does Alma Mahler compare to some of Mary's other historical heroines such as Hildegard of Bingen in *Illuminations* or Aemilia Bassano Lanier in *The Dark Lady's Mask*?

BOOK CLUB EXTRAS

Deepen your experience of Alma's world by listening to a few of her songs:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VnT8pFzWvRE>

Listen to Gustav Mahler's Adagietto from his Fifth Symphony, composed in the first summer of their marriage. He wrote this movement to express his deep love for Alma: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Les39aIKbzE>

Alma was very fond of champagne. Open a bottle of bubbly!