



## The Widow's Weeds by Allie Cresswell

### Questions for Reading Groups

1. Viola says that if she were to be cut in two the word 'gardener' would be found written through her. Is there any passion, role, relationship, value or belief that defines you in a similar way?
2. The novel is composed of two story threads and two time frames. Did you find this narrative technique easy to assimilate? What links and mirrored motifs did you see between Maisie's story and Viola's that made them two elements of one story as opposed to two parallel narratives? The two stories converge at the house in the Cotswolds. Did you anticipate how each woman would rescue the other?
3. Bereavement and grief are complex processes. What types of grief did the story explore? What did you think about the way the novel presents grief's various guises?
4. One of the novel's themes is women's friendship.
  - a. Consider and describe the different members of the women's friendship group. Who do you like? Who *are* you like, if any?
  - b. Do you think the women's friendships are a case of 'birds of a feather flock together' or 'any port in a storm'?
  - c. How does the relationship between Gwen and Val change the dynamic of the group?
  - d. Do you think Amy is right when she says the relationship between women can be as close, or closer, than a heterosexual relationship? Are there women that you have loved—as opposed to been in love with?
  - e. On the other hand, women's friendships can be fraught with jealousy, gossip and spite. Why do you think this is?
  - f. Why do you think older women rarely feature as central characters in fiction? The women in this novel are aged between their mid-forties and their eighties. What does their maturity add to the book? How would the book be different if the women were aged, say, in their twenties and thirties?
5. Attitudes about mental illness are different today than they were twenty or even ten years ago. Do you think it is legitimate to feature mental illness in works of fiction? Nowadays, addiction, including alcoholism, is considered an illness. What did you think of the way alcoholism and Viola's rehabilitation were depicted in this novel? James says that Oliver's attitudes and actions are a result of Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Do you agree? Is he ill, a controlling bully, or simply a man confident of his own charms who made a mistake by pushing things too far?
6. Compare the characters of Oliver and James. How are they alike? How different? What did you think of the portrayal of the other men in the novel: Graham, Martin, Michael and Dominic?
7. Readers of *The Hoarder's Widow* and *The Widow's Mite* found Viola a difficult character to like. Do you think her story, fraught with hardship and tragedy as it is, excuses or at least explains her behaviour?



8. The abusive relationship between Vanessa and Clive is well known amongst their friends and yet no one but Viola offers to help. Martin and Susanne's abusive relationship, however, is unsuspected by anyone. How familiar are you with the signs that a relationship might be abusive? What do you think constitutes emotional abuse and coercive control? Can fiction raise awareness about issues like domestic abuse? Should it?
9. Frances and Maxim's wedding mushrooms from their initial plans for a quiet ceremony and a low-key celebration although, as Frances says, they have the last laugh. Why do you think there is so much pressure on couples to have large, expensive weddings? Which 'wedding day' do you think Frances and Maxim will look back on with the most pleasure?
10. How is the novel's title worked out in its content? Discuss the references to: Horticulture and gardening; Weeds that scratch and sting; Wildflowers; Weeds as a euphemism for clothing.

How on earth will Maisie solve the issue of her mother-of-the-bride outfit?