

BOOK CLUB KIT

# ASHTON HALL

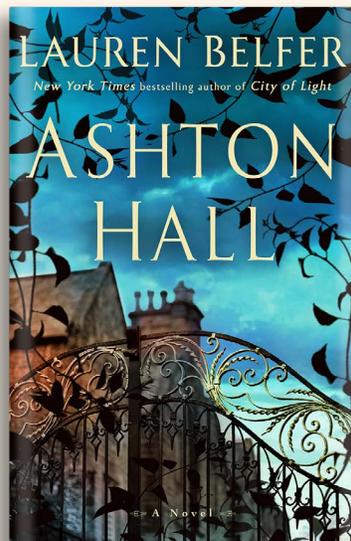
LAUREN BELFER

Dear Reader,

Welcome to the world of *Ashton Hall*! I'm thrilled you're here. I, too, belong to a book club and each month I look forward to enjoying the in-depth conversations and the camaraderie. I also look forward to the great food, often linked to that month's book!

I've been invited to talk about my novels at many book club meetings and these are the events I look forward to most—and feel so good about afterward—because of the opportunity to have detailed, thought-provoking, and sometimes challenging discussions among a small group of passionate readers. Ever since I was young, I've felt a spark of magic each time I open a novel and I'm guessing you have too. Readers like you truly make the long process of writing a novel worthwhile: I'm filled with gratitude.

I first had the idea for *Ashton Hall* back when I was in my twenties, amazingly, and was invited to stay at Blickling Hall, a National Trust historic mansion in Norfolk, England. Blickling was constructed in the early 1600s, on the site of homes dating back to the eleventh century. Remarkably, an acquaintance of mine was renting an apartment there and I felt beyond lucky to receive the invitation. English history had always fascinated me and I'd nurtured a dream that someday I would live in England. During my stay at Blickling, I toured the gorgeous gardens and those magnificent rooms that were open to the public. I also explored the private areas of the house, the back hallways and attics, accessible to me after visiting hours. As I made my way through the rambling, shadowed corridors and the old nurseries and storage rooms, walking deeper and deeper into the mysteries of the past, ideas came into my mind for a novel. I jotted down some notes, but I didn't begin writing. Other projects were demanding my attention, including life itself as, after my stay at Blickling, I went on to get married and become a mother.



Years later, when I'd published two novels and was completing a third, and my son was grown up, my husband was invited to spend an academic term at an institute affiliated with Cambridge University. The institute provided us with accommodation in a drafty, ramshackle seventeenth-century cottage that featured, among other quirky amenities, what the English call a French drain: an open cesspool in the outside alleyway that received much of the water used in the house (though not from the toilet!) and that required stirring every day. I was advised to pour a kettle of boiling water into it each morning the temperature fell below freezing.

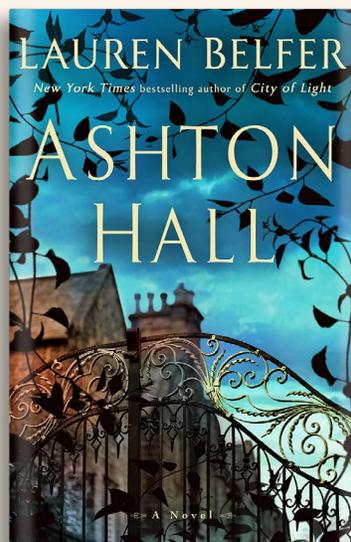
This was just one of the small ways I learned during my months in Cambridge that my youthful dream of living in England was far different from the actual experience. In some respects, it was even more wonderful than I'd ever imagined, because of the beauty, the layered history, and the surprising warmth of the people we met. In other ways, though, it was quite comically worse, with shops closing at weirdly early hours or, perversely, not stocking the items that were most in demand, and electric showers that short-circuited, giving off black smoke. I confronted the fact that British and American cultures are vastly different, even though the two nations share, to all appearances, the same language.

One day, as I wandered the narrow, historic streets of Cambridge—half in a dream as I contemplated ideas for my next novel—I suddenly knew: I'd rename Blickling Hall, move it to the Cambridge outskirts, and set the story there. The main characters came to me in a flash, people that I cared about deeply, especially Hannah, struggling to puzzle out her future after a devastating discovery, and her beloved son, Nicky. *Ashton Hall*, I realized, would be a very contemporary novel, couched in a rich historical setting, that would touch on themes of motherhood, neurodiversity, sexual identity, marriage, and fidelity.

And so, at last, I was ready to begin writing.

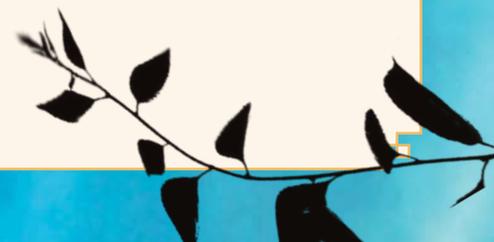
I hope you enjoy *Ashton Hall* and that this book club kit helps make your discussions even more intriguing.

Warm regards,  
Lauren



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. There are a number of themes in this book, including marriage, motherhood, family, sexuality, neurodivergence, and the dependence and independence of women. Which of them resonated the most with you? Are there any other themes or ideas that you see as crucial to this novel?
2. The novel's characters are distinctive and diverse. Did you have a favorite character throughout, or a storyline that resonated with you the most?
3. Neurodivergence plays a large role in the story, through Nicky's character. How did this character impact you? Why do you think the author decided to create Janet as a second neurodivergent character?
4. Discuss Hannah's relationship with Nicky. Did you learn anything from it? Did you identify with their relationship in any way?
5. What are some of the parallels between Hannah and Isabella Cresham, the woman locked away in Ashton Hall? How does Hannah's time there and her investigation into Isabella's life help her process her life changes?
6. In chapter 3, Mrs. Gardner asks: "How many lives can you imagine yourself living?" This question sticks in Hannah's head throughout the rest of the book, prompting reflections on her "alternate" life that could have been. Do you ever reflect on the other ways your life could have gone? Do you find it compelling, or stress-inducing?
7. Discuss the role of money, privilege, and class in *Ashton Hall*.
8. What do you think of Hannah's often humorous observations of British behavior? If you've spent time in the U.K., do you think they have the ring of truth?
9. What do you think of the storyline focused on Hannah's marriage with Kevin? Do you agree with how Hannah handled the situation with her husband's infidelity? And what about her relationship with Matthew? Would you have handled either of those situations differently?
10. *Ashton Hall* is a contemporary novel, but it does deeply explore a historical era, through Hannah's investigation into Isabella's life. What do you think of this dual timeline structure? Are there any storylines touched on in the novel that you wish had been further explored?
11. How has each of the main characters changed by the end of the novel?
12. What do you think of the book's ending? Were you surprised by how events unfolded? What do you think of the final chapter, written by Hannah herself? What would you imagine came next for the characters?



# BEHIND THE BOOK

I'd like to share with you some of the places I visited and some of the discoveries I made during my research.

*Ashton Hall* is my first novel set entirely in the present, but through the unfolding of the story, I wanted to explore how we as individuals go about recreating the past, including what we can know about those times and what we can never know. These questions feel very personal to me, because they developed from my own experiences researching the history of my family, visiting the town they came from in Europe, finding their names in business directories and old documents, and tracing how they made their way to America—and also from attempting to learn the fate of my family members who weren't able to reach America and perished in Europe during the Second World War.



The fictional house portrayed in *Ashton Hall* is primarily based on two stately homes where I've stayed, the National Trust's Blickling Hall in Norfolk and Madingley Hall, which is now a conference center just outside Cambridge. I also drew on other homes I studied, such as Haddon Hall, Hardwick Hall, and Baddesley Clinton.



The city of Cambridge figures in *Ashton Hall*. Its architectural beauty is astonishing. Sometimes I would feel awestruck as I walked along its narrow streets.

I did a great deal of research about England during the Elizabethan period (1558–1603), so that I could recreate daily life in the era as accurately as possible.



Oxburgh Hall is the setting of some important events in the novel.



One aspect of the novel involves medical practice and female medical practitioners during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I had fun reading the herbals from that era, especially John Gerard's exquisite and popular *Herball*.



While I was doing my research, I fell in love with illuminated manuscripts. The Luttrell Psalter, with its colorful and remarkable illustrations of Medieval life, inspired me as I created the fictional psalter discovered at Ashton Hall.

One book written in the sixteenth century that figures in the novel is Conrad Gessner's *Historia animalium: de avium natura*, which Isabella Cresham of Ashton Hall reads when she's a child.



On a lighter note, when I lived in Cambridge, I was surprised to find free-roaming cows in the public parks and open land. I'm a city person, so the necessity of sharing paths with cows was a not-always happy or easy adjustment. Whenever I went anywhere, I had to wear cow-appropriate shoes!

# RECIPES



I love the food in England. When I hear people complain about English food, I just don't understand. I especially love English cakes, pastries, scones, crumpets ... I could go on and on about the wonders of English desserts, what they call pudding. Afternoon tea is among the great English traditions, and it's my favorite time of day. Scones, gingerbread, crumpets, chocolate-almond croissants (not precisely English, but made to perfection at a certain bakery near Ashton Hall)—these all figure in the novel.

Here's one of my favorite recipes, for fruit scones, from the National Trust. The National Trust website is a terrific source for English recipes, both sweet and savory.

Here's the link to their fruit scone recipe:

[nationaltrust.org.uk/recipes/national-trust-fruit-scones](https://nationaltrust.org.uk/recipes/national-trust-fruit-scones)

More types of scones:

[nationaltrust.org.uk/ickworth/lists/mouthwatering-recipes-made-at-ickworth](https://nationaltrust.org.uk/ickworth/lists/mouthwatering-recipes-made-at-ickworth)

I adore gingerbread, and this National Trust recipe calls for wholemeal flour, what Americans call whole-wheat flour, so you know this particular gingerbread is good for you!

[nationaltrust.org.uk/recipes/sticky-gingerbread](https://nationaltrust.org.uk/recipes/sticky-gingerbread)

For many more National Trust recipes for British food, follow this link:

[nationaltrust.org.uk/recipes?pageIndex=18&pageSize=9](https://nationaltrust.org.uk/recipes?pageIndex=18&pageSize=9)

I hope you'll try some of these recipes with your book club. I, for one, would love to attend a book club meeting that included gingerbread as well as fruit scones with strawberry jam and clotted cream. Along with a cup of tea, these would provide a perfect beginning for a discussion of *Ashton Hall*.