

Reading Guide for **CONSCIENCE POINT** by Erica Abeel

About the Book

Maddy Shayne's life is perfect. She has escaped the tribulations of middle-age that appear to plague her peers. She has a handsome, dashing boyfriend, a loving teenaged daughter, and dual careers in classical music and TV journalism. But cracks begin to threaten her well-put-together life. The new young regime at her news show may desire fresher younger faces on their reporters. Her daughter Laila's still waters run deep. And her boyfriend Nick seems to believe a day without playing with someone else's life is like a day without sunshine.

As a scion of the dysfunctional and wealthy Ashcroft family, Nick uses his charisma to enforce his legacy of entitlement. His sister Violet—a figure forever shackled by the ironic bitterness of a poor little rich girl—was Maddy's best friend in college before she disappeared into the underworld of Europe to pursue art and self-destruction. So even before their eight-year love affair began, Nick and Maddy shared a strange history.

The past has not passed. Old habits, old secrets, and old attachments have a way of showing up in this story of people with a lust for life and each other.

Alongside passion rides mystery. Maddy's daughter Laila was adopted as a baby under circumstances that cannot be revealed. Something in Nick's background could ruin his name. Violet, who surfaces as a riddle of memories, has led a life that is a game of trickery.

In addition to a magnetic plot, the story includes a satirical look at the excesses of the moneyed New York set and a picture of the poignant rigors of the world of classical music. **Conscience Point** is an embroidery of the fascinating connections people stitch between friends, families, and ambitions in the struggle to design a life. Readers are going to be talking about this juicy but literate tale of how one woman's life fell apart and came back together again.

About the Author

Erica Abeel, like her heroine, Madelyn Shane, is a high-achieving practitioner of the humanities. The former French literature professor is a working journalist and film critic who as a teenager aspired to be a dancer. **Conscience Point** interweaves, like multicolored yarn, strands from different moments of my life," she says.

Along with her work in academia and journalism, she has mastered the art of crafting books, including the novels *Women Like Us* and *The Last Romance*. **Conscience Point** is her fifth. She's currently working on a new novel, and

covering film for *Filmmaker Magazine* and *indieWIRE.com*. Abeel is a mother of two grown children. She lives and works in Manhattan.

Interview with the Author

This is a story that is told in multiple time periods. Though it reads smoothly, the construction is actually sophisticated and complex. Can you tell us something about how you planned it and "mapped it out"? Did you use an outline?

I must have used 100 outlines to map out the sequence. I even outlined the plot backwards! The challenge was to keep both back story and present story moving forward. And to make the flashbacks organic, as well as inviting, rather than intrusive. Also in the sections set in the past in the early 60's, I tried for an Edenic tone, because a) it was a time of big dreams; and b) that's when Maddy first became involved with the Ashcroft family.

So many well-drawn and memorable characters live between the covers of your story, were any of them inspired by people you have met? Are any based on your own experiences? Or your own perspectives?

And: Islesford is a thinly disguised East Hampton, a watering hole on Long Island's Gold Coast. I've spent a lot of time there. The place is a bunch of characters in search of a satirist.

Why did you choose to write about the New York art scene?

As the author of four books (*Conscience Point* is my fifth) and as a journalist who covers a variety of beats, I know something of the New York media world. It shares aspects with a jungle habitat, especially these days, when it's so hard for any individual to get noticed above the cyber-clamor. It's great fun to write about that habitat because the pushiness is so naked. Even if you try, you can't exaggerate.

But I also feel a reverence for the real artists and musicians and writers who are trying to stay relevant in a world undergoing seismic shifts. Pianists Maddy and Anton, editor Nick and their writer friends sometimes feel part of a vanishing culture -- a Chekhovian theme, really, which interests me for its dramatic potential.

In Maddy and her friends, we see a lot of problems and issues related to mid-life. Why did you choose to focus on that age group and their vulnerabilities?

Partly because they're my own issues; and partly because these mid-lifers and their problems are under-represented in both literature and film. Why don't we

hear more from these people? There's certainly an audience for them. That mid-lifers are quasi-invisible in the world of print is especially ironic, since it's precisely that generation that loves and buys books.

Violet is an amazing character. What inspired you to create her?

I think some novelists tend to create in their books variations on the same basic character. A version of "Violet" in *Conscience Point* already existed in "Delphine," a character in my previous novel, *Women Like Us*. I'm drawn to create characters who are flamboyant, charismatic, larger-than-life – totally outrageous and in some sense not suited for practical living. And my more timorous characters get to play off and are inspired by them.

Laila's background and sensibilities create racial undertones in the book. Much is hinted about her alienation, and much goes unsaid. Were you trying to show the reader how a bi-racial girl might feel about being adopted into a white, affluent world?

Laila seems to have been born with the gift of empathy – like Maddy was born with perfect pitch. That she aspires to political activism is surely fed by her awareness of being bi-racial in her mother's affluent world. But then – don't want a spoiler here – Laila gets to test the strength of her beliefs, doesn't she. I think Laila also represents a voice of conscience in a hypocritical and self-serving milieu, where people are content merely to drop money at benefits.

If you were thrown back in time and given the chance to write this book all over again, would you change anything, such time spent doing research, your emotional attitude, etc., about how you approached it?

Oh, I'd want to snatch back the hours from all the other work that made claims on me during that period. (And trips to the dentist; I sometimes had to choose between a crown and my prose style.) But though *Conscience Point* took a long time to write, I think the very slowness helped nurture its mysterious and convoluted plot. Since I was teaching fulltime at City University of New York, the novel took several years to find its shape.

As for the research, I'd do the same marvelous thing: sit down with a gifted Juilliard student, who would walk me through Chopin's "Harp Etude." And I'd go back in a heartbeat to Nohant, George Sand's estate in central France where she hung out with Chopin. It's where *Conscience Point* begins – though when I was sitting on the terrace at Nohant listening to the merles, I didn't know that.

Emotional attitude? What you need to see a novel through is a determination bordering on insanity and the stamina of an Olympic athlete.

What do you want the reader to get out of your book? After all, the word conscience is in the novel's title. Are you trying to offer lessons?

No, not trying to offer lessons: that would be too finger-wagging and scoldy, wouldn't it? The characters certainly learn lessons, though -- most often ones they never asked to learn! And *Conscience Point* does show these characters continually moving away from and toward some magnetic moral center. Maddy wants to hide out with the Big Bear and the Little Bear from her deepest obligation, but can she? The novel also turns on its head that tired old notion of revenge. But mostly I just want readers to be entertained – and maybe haunted.

Are you a big fan of F. Scott Fitzgerald? He is referred to a couple of times in your book. Does his style, and vision of the rich, influence your writing?

I'm a big fan of Fitzgerald, yes. I guess some of my characters, Violet in particular, live in some latter-day frenzied jazz age. Careless and heedless, like Daisy and Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*. But I like to think that Violet is also a woman *ahead* of her time, who understands the sacrifices and joys of the artist's life.

Your characters make their share of mistakes in the world. Is this, however, a book about people making questionable choices, living out their inevitable fates, or both?

Both. Once certain doors are opened, certain barriers breached it's hard to deflect the consequences of those acts. As Maddy reflects late in the book, some iron-clad logic resembling fate has led to her present crisis. But life is full of second and fourth chances. My characters are not for the most part (with one exception) doomed by hubris – they're wily and resourceful, with a rage to live and the will to find the way forward.

What are your favorite books and authors? Can you tell us what makes a book stand out for you?

The Red and the Black by Stendhal has been a favorite since childhood. I've read it in French and in countless translations that don't quite make the cut. I love Stendhal's irony and wit; his fetish about *energy*; the overarching political perspective; the erotic combat between Julien Sorel and Mathilde de la Mole. And is there a better scene in literature than when Julien seduces Madame de Renal in the garden in Verrieres? I'll always be in love with Julien Sorel. What makes Stendhal sing for me? An elegance of spirit that's simply expressed.

Conscience Point was also inspired by *Brideshead Revisited* by Evelyn Waugh, a novel I regularly reread. The Arcadian Oxford days of Charles and Sebastian suggested to me Maddy's summer at Conscience Point. And I attempted to adapt

the haunting and ambiguous triangle in "Brideshead" to a different time and culture.

I also admire Ian McEwan; clocked hours trying to unlock the secrets of *Atonement*. He and John Updike are masters at writing about physical love. I loved the romance of *The English Patient* by Michael Ondaatje. Enjoy the savage wit of Gore Vidal's nonfiction. And recently discovered the hilarious Spanglish of Junot Diaz in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

How do you see your future? What are your plans for the coming years, literary and otherwise?

Work, work, and more work (with sessions at the gym in between). Writing ain't fun, but being in the midst of a fictional world makes the world – at the least the writer's – cohere. *Everything applies*. I'm currently working on a novel partly set in Paris when the Beat poets and friends lived there for a season or two. I'll continue to cover film festivals – Cannes, Toronto, New York. Exhausting, but an adrenalin rush. Also takes me out of the solitude of fiction writing. And movies teach so much about narrative drive. Above all, I feel blessed to have my wonderful family.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why do you think the author chose ***Conscience Point*** as the title of the book and the name of the Ashcroft's land?
2. Sex, violence, and scandal—they all exist in ***Conscience Point***. Yet, do you think of it as a literary (serious) book or a popular fiction pot boiler? Why?
3. This book is quite strong linguistically. Are there any sentences or passages that you find memorable? Which?
4. How wise or unwise is Maddy? What do you think about her relationship with her daughter? If you were a mother raising a child, would you let a man like Nick into your life? Why? Why not?
5. What does this book seem to say about the mother-daughter bond? About parental responsibility?
6. Did Maddy make a good decision when she left Marshall? Why or why not? How do feel about how she dealt with him?
7. Though Laila is half-white, there are indications throughout the book that she feels alienated from whites. What are those clues?

8. Nick warned Maddy to stay away from him and the rest of his family. Why do you think she became sexually and socially involved with him despite that?
9. What do you think of Violet? Is she crazy or simply ahead of her time? Is she a victim of the Ashcrofts' seemingly pathological legacy?
10. It is stated that the main characters—Maddy, Violet, Nick, and Laila—are fatefully tied together. What barriers, however, exist between them?
11. Nick. Nick. Nick. Just what kind of person is Nick—bad, good, or somewhere in between? Give reasons for your thinking.
12. Some of the partner-switching that happens in ***Conscience Point*** suggests the phrase: the heart wants what the heart wants. Or as one character says, "Love makes its own laws." Do you believe this saying is true and that people cannot do much to repress their ardor once they have fallen in love? Why or why not?
13. Why are his lovers drawn to Nick despite his seeming disloyalty? Could you see yourself falling for someone like Nick?
14. What does the novel imply about the choices women had in life back in the 60s? What is the story's view of how society responds to aging? Are those views valid? Overblown? Outdated? Why or why not?

Recommended Reading

Women Like Us by Erica Abeel
The Last Romance by Erica Abeel
I'll Call You Tomorrow and Other Lies between Men and Women by Erica Abeel
Only When I Laugh by Erica Abeel
The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald
This Side of Paradise by F. Scott Fitzgerald
Less than Zero by Bret Easton Ellis
Final Payments by Mary Gordon
Brideshead Revisited by Evelyn Waugh
Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë