

Secular Women of the Triangle Book Club Discussion Questions

***In Defense of Witches: The Legacy of the Witch Hunts and Why Women Are Still on Trial* by Mona Chollet**

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think the title "*In Defense of Witches: The Legacy of the Witch Hunts and Why Women Are Still on Trial*" was chosen? Do you think it is an accurate representation of the contents of the book? If you were titling the book, what would you have chosen?
2. Chollet talks a lot about her personal experiences in *In Defense of Witches*. Do her experiences and views resonate with yours? Are there any specific parts you could or could not relate to? Was there a quote, story, or concept from the book that was especially meaningful to you?
3. In the forward, Carmen Maria Machado implores the reader to "Imagine, for a moment, your witch. Not your earliest witch, necessarily, but the one who first captured your attention."
 - a. Who is your witch? Does she fit the characteristics Machado lists (woman, single, childless, artist, craftswoman or scientist, wily, self-satisfied, and in charge of her own affairs)? How did you perceive this witch as a child and has this perception shifted as an adult? What do you think of when someone mentions "witch"?
4. In the introduction of *In Defense of Witches*, Mona Chollet quotes Pat Robertson's infamous claim that "Feminism encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians." While his statement is extreme (and unintentionally hilarious), it reflects persistent and exaggerated stereotypes about feminism.
 - a. What stereotypes about feminists have you encountered—whether in media, politics, or even personal conversations? Have you ever been personally accused of fitting into one of these stereotypes? How do these misconceptions impact the way feminism is perceived today? How have you seen views on feminism change over time?
5. Chollet highlights the ways independent women are often viewed with pity, skepticism, or even as a threat to societal norms. From the stereotype that feminists are lonely and unhappy to the persistent condescension toward women who choose independence, these narratives shape how women are perceived and treated.
 - a. Have you ever been on the receiving end of these attitudes—whether about your feminist beliefs or your independent lifestyle? How did you recognize them, and how did you respond? Do you think these attitudes are changing, or do they still persist in subtle (or not-so-subtle) ways?
6. Chollet argues that marriage and motherhood are often framed as the only inherently meaningful life paths for women, fulfilling both societal expectations and personal redemption.
 - a. Growing up, were you taught (explicitly or implicitly) that having children was a necessary or expected part of life? Did you embrace these ideas, reject them, or struggle with them? How did your religious background—or lack of one—shape your perspective on motherhood as a life goal?
7. Chollet describes the expectation that mothers should center their entire lives around their children, often at the expense of their careers, ambitions, and personal fulfillment.
 - a. What factors went into your decision on whether to have children?
 - b. If you are a mother, have you felt the pressure to center your life around your children in your own life? How have you navigated these expectations, and what strategies have helped you forge your own path as a mother?
 - c. If you plan to have a family, knowing that societal expectations often place a disproportionate burden on mothers, how do you envision balancing personal fulfillment with parenthood? Are there cultural or structural changes that you hope will make this balance easier for future

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generations of women?

- d. For those who are chosen to be child-free, have you ever felt external pressure or judgment for your choice not to have children? How have you responded to societal narratives that equate motherhood with self-sacrifice and fulfillment?
8. In *The Dizzy Heights*, the author highlights the stark differences in how aging is perceived for men and women. While women are often pressured to maintain youthfulness and are seen as 'expiring' after a certain age—especially in relation to fertility—men are generally not subjected to the same scrutiny despite scientific evidence that men's fertility also declines with age. These double standards may contribute to anxiety and societal expectations around aging.
 - a. How have you personally observed or experienced the differences in how society treats aging men versus aging women? Do you think media, pop culture, or personal relationships reinforce or challenge these double standards?
 - b. How does the cultural emphasis on women's fertility and "expiration date" shape societal expectations, and why do you think the decline in men's fertility is rarely discussed?
 - c. Do you think religion has influenced these attitudes toward aging and gender? Have you witnessed religious beliefs reinforcing or challenging these perceptions in your own experience?
9. In *The Dizzy Heights*, Chollet explores how confident, outspoken women—especially those of middle or advanced age—have historically been seen as a threat. During the witch hunts, many women were targeted not for practicing magic, but for their refusal to be submissive. As Anne Barstow notes, these women 'talked back in a time when they were increasingly expected to be submissive.' Similarly, in colonial New England, many witchcraft accusations stemmed from a woman's 'uppity' attitude, particularly in relation to her husband. This pattern of punishing women for their confidence and defiance continues in various forms today.
 - a. Have you ever experienced judgment or criticism for displaying confidence, particularly in situations where women are expected to be more reserved?
 - b. How do religious or cultural beliefs about femininity and submission continue to shape expectations for women's behavior today? Have you witnessed or experienced this firsthand?
 - c. In what ways do modern women push back against these expectations, and how can we continue challenging these lingering biases?
10. In *Turning the World Upside Down*, Chollet highlights how women, who were once the primary healers, were pushed out of the medical profession as it became more formalized and male-dominated. When they were finally allowed to return, it was in the role of nurses—positions that reinforced traditional ideals of femininity, such as being gentle, maternal, and devoted. Meanwhile, doctors, typically men, were elevated as figures of authority, intelligence, and scientific prestige. This pattern is not unique to medicine; throughout history, many professions have followed a similar trajectory, where women's contributions were diminished or restricted to supportive roles.
 - a. Can you think of other professions where women were once dominant but later pushed to the sidelines as the field became more respected or lucrative?
 - b. How do we culturally perceive and value 'women's work' versus 'men's work'? What expectations do we place on careers based on gender?
 - c. How have you seen gendered career expectations play out in your own life, whether in education, job opportunities, or workplace dynamics?
 - d. What are some ways in which gender roles in careers are shifting today? Are there still barriers that women face when entering male-dominated fields—or that men face when entering traditionally female-dominated fields?