

This reading group guide has been developed by Simon and Schuster for Eighteen Acres includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with Nicolle Wallace. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. Please click here if you are interested in having Nicolle speak to your book club.

INTRODUCTION

Eighteen Acres follows three powerful women in Washington, D.C.: Charlotte Kramer, the first female President of the United States; Melanie Kingston, the White House Chief of Staff; and Dale Smith, a White House correspondent for one of the top national networks. All three women struggle to balance their high-powered careers with their personal lives and relationships, to varying degrees of success. Charlotte and her staff must combat dangerous threats from abroad as well as from her very own cabinet, and even her husband. Melanie questions whether completely devoting her life to her job is really what she wants. And when Dale becomes the biggest news story of the campaign, she's suddenly on the other side of the news media.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. With all the risks Dale and Peter take for their relationship, even when they're trying to keep their affair a secret, it is still fairly obvious to those close to them what is going on. Do they almost want to get caught? Why doesn't Charlotte confront Peter until she does? If not for Dale's accident, do you think their relationship would have ever surfaced publicly? If so, by whom?
2. Why is Charlotte committed to fighting what everyone believes is a losing battle for her campaign? Does she make the right choice to continue? What do you think ultimately got her the win? Could they have won without Tara?
3. It's mentioned in passing that Charlotte is a Democrat, but although the story is set against a political backdrop, politics are hardly ever discussed. How did this impact the novel? Does it matter what political party the characters belonged to?
4. Discuss Roger's role in the story. Did he do the right thing by switching the helicopters? What motivated his actions? Did Charlotte do the right thing, as his employer? As his friend?
5. Charlotte seems to have less emotion than the other characters. She is very stoic, and always makes selfless, rational decisions. Discuss her resigned acceptance of her husband's affair. Do you think this trait was what made her a good president?
6. Brooke and Mark seem to have the only happy, balanced marriage in the book. Why is this? Do you think it's possible for couples in the spotlight to maintain a healthy relationship?
7. Why do you think Peter is consistently drawn to powerful, career-driven women? Will his relationship with Dale deteriorate as her career strengthens, as it did with Charlotte, or do you think it will be different this time?

8. Compare and contrast the romantic relationships in the book and main character's views on love. Think about Charlotte and Peter, Dale and Peter, Melanie and Brian. Who is happiest? How does success impact their relationships?
9. Discuss how each character balances their priorities. What is most important to each woman? How do their personal and professional lives compete? Talk about the sacrifices they make for their careers, and the sacrifices they make for their relationships. Would you make the same choices?
10. Whose perspective did you enjoy reading from most? Which woman did you relate to? Who did you sympathize with?
11. Why does Melanie take the job as Charlotte's Secretary of Defense? She seemed ready to resign her post and excited to lead a less high-powered life—is she simply obligated to obey the wishes of her President and friend? Do you think she will be happy and fulfilled with this change in position, or do you think work will continue to suck the life out of her?
12. What do you think Roger's last note says?
13. The novel ends on an almost bittersweet note, with Charlotte saying "Well, tonight, we celebrate your new job, and tomorrow we get up and start all over again." (p. 391) Were you happy with how the story ended for each character? Would you have wanted anything to turn out differently? What do you imagine happens to Charlotte, Melanie, and Dale next?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. If you live nearby, take a trip to Washington D.C. and tour the area where Charlotte, Melanie and Dale live and work. Eat at the Caucus Room, a "D.C. establishment restaurant" Melanie and Michael frequent, or Bistro Lepic, where Melanie and Brian have their first date. Take a tour of the White House, and visit Melanie's favorite D.C. landmark, the Jefferson Memorial. Or take a virtual tour of the White House online—visit <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/white-house-101>.
2. Discuss Charlotte's leadership capabilities as the first female President of the United States. Do you see the U.S. having a female president in the near future? What obstacles do you think women in politics still have to overcome? Do you think the gender of the president matters, or just their ideas?

A CONVERSATION WITH NICOLE WALLACE

1. **You're the former Communications Director for the White House and currently a political media strategist. How much of *Eighteen Acres* is based on your real life, and the lives of those around you in Washington? Which of your three protagonists are you most like?**

The story is about three women who are entirely fictional, but they work in a place I know very well. To the extent that their jobs force them to make difficult trade-offs between their personal lives and their professional responsibilities, I can relate quite well, as can most women I knew in politics. Melanie's life as a "staffer" is the most similar to my experience in the White House, but she stayed much longer than I did and accomplished more—rising to the post of White House Chief of Staff.

2. **What inspired you to write a novel, and this one in particular? Have you always been a writer at heart?**

I first thought about writing a novel about the White House after I'd worked there long enough to realize that people had no idea what life is really like for those who live and work there. I never met anyone who wasn't fascinated by the place, regardless of their personal political views. Writing about the first woman president was an idea that came to me after the 2008 campaign. Everywhere I went, people wanted to talk about Hillary Clinton and Sarah Palin. It struck me that while their candidacies were unsuccessful; they had touched off a conversation about women in politics that was long overdue.

3. **In a high powered job such as yours, or the women in *Eighteen Acres*, it seems difficult to maintain a balance with a personal life. How do you manage to do so?**

It's one of the most difficult things about life in the White House for everyone who works there—men and women. I was very fortunate in that my husband also worked in high level positions in the Bush administration and on the Bush and McCain campaigns, so we shared most of our professional experiences.

4. **You largely leave politics out of the story, though it's set against an intense political backdrop. Why did you decide to write a relatively bipartisan story?**

I wanted to write a story about the distance that Charlotte, Melanie and Dale traveled personally and professionally, and I didn't want the reader to care about which political party they belonged to. It makes me happy when people say to me "I couldn't figure out for the longest time if Charlotte was a democrat or a republican."

5. **The White House in *Eighteen Acres* is run by women. Do you think there will be a female US President in the near future? Why do you think there hasn't been one yet?**

I believe that the first female president is alive today. Women are coming into their own politically all over the country, in senate races and gubernatorial races. The sorts of intractable problems we face as a country are well suited for the intuitive diplomacy and learned patience of many women leaders.

6. **Charlotte ultimately wins the election because she chooses a running mate from the opposing party. Is that a strategy you would advocate for politicians? Do you think such an arrangement would work?**

People hold conventional politics in such low regard that it would seem to me that anything "outside the box" would be worth a try.

7. **Tara seems to have a lot in common with Sarah Palin—they're both fiery stump speakers with an everyman appeal who aren't afraid to be blunt. Was this intentional?**

I spent enough time in Washington to understand that Washington politicians have a limited appeal to voters. For the campaign section of the story, it was important that the story reflect the public's hunger for candidates who are plain-spoken, direct and relatable. Tara and Sarah Palin share those traits, but they are two very different women with different stories.

8. **You were a spokesperson for John McCain's 2008 campaign and served as a campaign advisor to Sarah Palin. What role do you see yourself playing in the next election?**

I traveled the country with two candidates for President—George W. Bush in 2003 and 2004 and John McCain in 2008. I treasure both experiences and the opportunity I had to visit every corner of this country and meet people from nearly every state, but it's a grueling job best left to people who are as eager now as I was then.

9. **What writers and novels have had an impact on you? What are you reading now?**

Run and The Patron Saint of Liars by Ann Patchett, *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold, and *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett have stayed with me like few other novels I've read in recent years. *The Devil Wears Prada*, by Lauren Weisberger, inspired me to tell a story that was as much about the place, and its limitations and allure, as it was about the characters. *Prep* by Curtis Sittenfeld was the book I gave to everyone I knew for a couple years because I loved it so much. *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald and *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger were the first books that changed how I felt about the world. Right now, I'm reading *The Postmistress*, by Sarah Blake, *Persuasion* by Jane Austen, and I have been planning to start the Steig Larsson trilogy for months, but my deadlines keep getting in the way.

10. **Do you see yourself writing another book? You have a very interesting life yourself, would you ever write nonfiction?**

I'm working on the sequel to *Eighteen Acres* now. In it, Tara has her own voice, and we get to take the ride from the New York Attorney General's office to the Vice Presidency with her. Dale, Charlotte and Melanie also return. We get to know them better by spending more time with them. I'm enjoying their stories so much, I can't imagine doing anything else.