



LITERARY BOOK CLUB

December 2019 Selection

***A Well-Behaved Woman* by Therese Anne Fowler**

Alva Smith, her southern family destitute after the Civil War, married into one of America's great Gilded Age dynasties: the newly wealthy but socially shunned Vanderbilts. Ignored by New York's old-money circles and determined to win respect, she designed and built nine mansions, hosted grand balls, and arranged for her daughter to marry a duke. But Alva also defied convention for women of her time, asserting power within her marriage and becoming a leader in the women's suffrage movement.

With a nod to Jane Austen and Edith Wharton, in *A Well-Behaved Woman* Therese Anne Fowler paints a glittering world of enormous wealth contrasted against desperate poverty, of social ambition and social scorn, of friendship and betrayal, and an unforgettable story of a remarkable woman. Meet Alva Smith Vanderbilt Belmont, living proof that history is made by those who know the rules--and how to break them.

ISBN 9781250095473

Discussion Questions:

1. *A Well-Behaved Woman* opens with this compelling passage: "When they asked about the Vanderbilts and the Belmonts, about their celebrations and depredations...when they asked why she did the extreme things she'd done, Alva said it all began quite simply: Once there was a desperate young woman whose mother was dead and whose father was dying almost as quickly as his money was running out....She was twenty-one years old, ripened unpicked fruit rotting on the branch." (3) How would you characterize Alva's circumstances at the start of the novel and as her story goes on? How does she begin to flourish?
2. The author's descriptions of tenement life in lower Manhattan are especially vivid and heartbreaking. Would you consider the city and surrounding environs a character in the novel? How does the setting—a budding New York

City becoming a world-class capital for art, architecture, and society, and a hub for all walks of life—enhance the drama on the page?

3. How do Alva’s increasingly dire circumstances change once she has married into the Vanderbilts family? Do these changes alter her essential nature or character? Does she stay devout to her sense of ethics or empathy?
4. What are marriage markets and debuts, and how do these elaborate presentations work out for the women of the novel? For Alva, Consuelo Yznaga, or any of Alva’s young sisters or daughter? How much choice do these young women have to participate in finding an attractive suitor, and what risks do they face?
5. “Money was no fix for that girl, true—But please, God, she thought, let it be for me.” (8) What freedom does money buy for women in this generation? Do the trappings of wealth justify the opportunity to escape a place like Five Points?
6. “Love was a frivolous emotion, certainly no basis for a marriage—every young lady knew this. You must always put sense over feeling.” (24) Is Alva content with her choice to marry William at his proposal? How does she justify this decision? Does it matter if there is no love in a marriage? Or can love grow in such conditions?
7. What gives Alva her confidence and courage? Is it rooted in her privileged birth and experiences, in continued access to the best life has to offer? How does adversity—personal and societal—challenge and invigorate her?
8. Alva and her upper-class contemporaries are seemingly, and not uncommonly, in the dark about the most basic functions of their physical bodies. How have things changed for women in the last century and a half—and how do we share information about such core experiences as sexuality, pregnancy, childbirth, and aging? How has this change in knowledge-sharing, care, and education improved our lives? Have cultural attitudes shifted when it comes to perceptions of female sensuality and a wife’s “duty?”
9. “Whatever he believed was correct in regard to her keeping, he could enact.” (75) This is the chilling thought Alva has on her wedding day when she considers the kinds of power her new husband will have over her. Not

exclusive to women of wealth, this kind of male privilege affected women of all social classes. How does Alva test and successfully reshape this power and control?

10. “After all, by connecting him securely to the Vanderbilts, he would profit as much as she. It was a business arrangement.” (61) Here the New York social scene is a world built on alliances. Who succeeds in such a setting? How does Ward McAllister make his mark and thrive? Who orchestrates these rigid society-life rules?
11. What is Alva’s take on the “old money” versus “new money” conflict? How are the two worlds described in the novel and what defines them? Is “new money” gauche? How do the nouveaux riches behave generally and what resistance awaits them from the “old money” types?
12. How does Alva rebel within her role as societal and charitable maven at the helm of one of America’s most powerful dynasties? As a woman in 1880s New York City, what does she shake up and which principles and duties does she adhere to? Is Alva “the well-behaved woman” of the book’s title? Discuss.
13. “He had his hand on her collarbone now and was saying, ‘why would you want to be bothered with all that political nonsense? What’s wrong with simply enjoying being a lady of privilege?’” “Ask your sisters. They want more, too.” (138) How did you feel reading passages like the one quoted here? Inspiration, admiration, camaraderie? Something else? What is at stake for Alva when she campaigns for suffrage and other social movements? What promise did social change hold for her?
14. What does Oliver Belmont represent to Alva, and does that change over time? Why does Alva initially reject her feelings—is it all strategic?
15. Why does Alva ignore the gossip about her husband’s infidelities in the course of their marriage? What changes?
16. “I’m going to make the most of it, Mary. All of it. I’m going to beat society at its own game.” (151) Does Alva succeed with this bold assertion? What does the grand house on Fifth Avenue come to symbolize for her at its building (and then well into her marriage)? How does Alva leave her mark on the Vanderbilt name, New York society, and the lives around her? How does she reinvent

herself and the literal landscape of the city?

17. Compare Alva's attitudes and passions in life to those of her sister-in-law Alice. Though both women are immensely wealthy and socially influential, how differently do each of them choose to wield their power? In what ways do they diverge?
18. "They and their friends existed on a joyous merry-go-round of wealth." (202) How would you characterize the lives and fancies of the wealthiest families at the turn of the 20th century? How do they spend their days and fortunes? What marks their privilege—and does this privilege extend beyond their material belongings to their seemingly-no-consequences-behavior? Discuss the boating accident scene.
19. Why does Alva choose to confess her secret desire for Oliver to Lady Consuelo? Aside from deepening the intimacy of their friendship, does the revelation open new avenues of trouble for them? What, if anything, might have been different had Alva kept this truth to herself?
20. How does Alva direct her daughter Consuelo's marriage prospects? What risks does she warn her daughter of and how does she choose to educate her? Given her own experiences, why doesn't Alva encourage a marriage based on love? Do you agree with her guidance?
21. "The cost of any and all of it was merely money, and he had more of that than he could ever spend." (284) Is it hard to imagine having this kind of extreme existence and wealth? Do you think this untouchable status would influence the decisions you'd make? Do money and power corrupt? Was Alva immune to it?
22. "An intelligent woman in this world takes her chances where she finds them." (170) What are those chances for Alva? What about for you personally?
23. Does Consuelo Yznaga's plight make her a sympathetic character? How does her lifelong friendship and intimacy with the Vanderbilts shape the arc of the story? Could you forgive her shocking betrayal, as Alva considers on the final page? Why or why not?
24. "Miss Harper likened you to an ox. She said sometimes you just put your head down and push until you get where you wish to be." (295) Alva was



unequivocally a woman of action. Would you call her shrewd or brilliant, ahead of her time? Does she remind you of any change makers, in or out of the public eye?

25. “My entire life, Consuelo. That’s how long women have been patiently speaking on this subject to one another and to the men in charge—who take advantage of our habits of being polite and cooperative while censuring every opposite behavior. Men only respect power. So we must be powerful.” (381) How does this advice resonate with you as a modern reader?
26. Were you inspired to dive deeper into the lives, lavish residences, and artifacts of the Vanderbilt and Belmont families while reading this book? How does the author’s note at the end of the book help orient you with what was crafted by the author’s imagination and what elements were factual? Were you surprised by any findings?
27. What would you wish for Alva—or Consuelo Yznaga—if their stories continued on after the last page?

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Recommendations:

- If you liked *A Well-Behaved Woman*, you might like [*Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald*](#)
- You might also enjoy [*The Other Einstein*](#)