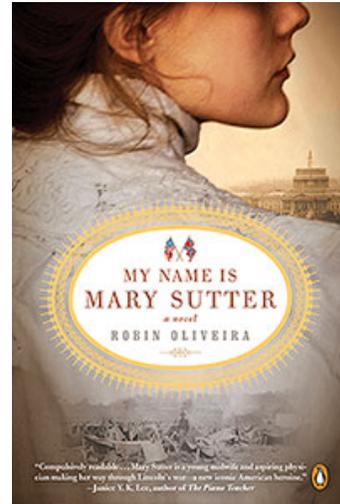


## *My Name Is Mary Sutter* Book Club Guide

### Introduction

Talented and ambitious, twenty-one year old Mary Sutter is a respected Albany midwife who longs to be a doctor. Refused by the medical college simply for being a woman, Mary presses surgeon Dr. James Blevens for an apprenticeship. Despite calling on Mary's expertise during a difficult delivery, Blevens refuses her, setting in motion a chain of events which will take Mary through the carnage of the Civil War and set the stage for a great romance. Robin Oliveira's debut novel *My Name is Mary Sutter* is the epic narrative of one woman's personal strength and struggle, a story which encompasses grand history and private grief, the progress of an entire gender and generation, and the tale of one woman's love.



Frustrated by her lack of professional opportunities, Mary rebels, running away to Washington and straight into the heart of the Civil War. Working side by side with Dr. William Stipp, the very man who mentored James Blevens, Mary is soon witness to unimaginable suffering and loss of life. She struggles to keep up with the ever-increasing tide of wounded soldiers arriving at Dr. Stipp's makeshift Union Hotel Hospital, and Oliveira's unflinching depiction of the horrors of the Civil War—both on the battlefield and in the hospitals—is matched by her deep understanding of the contradictions in Mary's complex character. While Mary's stubborn streak and single-mindedness are an asset to her medical aspirations, they also have heartbreaking consequences. Torn between her commitment to her family and her obligations to the soldiers, when Mary's mother begs her to return home to help deliver her sister's baby, Mary makes a decision that she will regret forever. Beneath that steely exterior lies a vulnerable, even occasionally frightened young woman who is nearly overwhelmed by the pain and suffering of war but never doubts her own talents or abandons her ambition.

Filled with true-life Civil War characters such as Dorothea Dix and Abraham Lincoln and built on meticulous research, *My Name is Mary Sutter* is a rich tapestry of historical fact and compelling fiction in which Oliveira effortlessly melds the voices of the past with those of her characters. Her prose is gripping, intense and lively, and she controls her sprawling storyline with expert precision, and at the center of it all is the unforgettable Mary Sutter – an inspiration to those who struggle against the obstacles others have set for them, who break down barriers of prejudice, and who, after waiting for so long, find a fulfilling and passionate life.

### Reader Questions

- 1 The end of *My Name is Mary Sutter* is both satisfying and surprising. What was your response to the conclusion of each character's story?

- 2 Women's rights have greatly improved since Mary's time, but do you believe that women are still limited by prejudice as to what they can or should do professionally? Do you believe men and women should have different roles or responsibilities within society?
- 3 Beyond Mary, which character did you find most interesting? Why? Which character did you find the least interesting?
- 4 Blevens explains that he cannot accept Mary as an apprentice because of the Civil War. Do you believe he would have taken her on had the the war not begun? Why?
- 5 As a woman and midwife, Mary has a particular kind of medical knowledge; Blevens and Stipp have another. What are the values and limitations of each? How does Mary eventually blend the two?
- 6 Describe Mary and Jenny's relationship. What type of tensions exist? Consider the relationship from both women's perspectives.
- 7 "From labor to death, she thought, despite every moment at the breast, every reprimand, every tender tousle of hair, every fever fought, every night spent worrying, it came to this: you couldn't protect your children from anything, not even from each other" (p. 43). Do you believe Amelia is right? What experiences from your own life make you feel this way?
- 8 How is Dr. Blevens affected by his experiences during the Civil War?
- 9 From Jake to Thomas to William Stipp, there is a wide range of male characters in the novel. What type of masculinity does each demonstrate?
- 10 Have you ever struggled with the same kind of professional or personal obstacles that Mary does? How did you handle it? What did you learn from the experience?