

Discussion questions

1. The story follows several sets of mothers and daughters: Connie and Grace, Grace and Sophia, Deliverance and Mercy, Mercy and Prudence. Each of these women have different points of view, and they often have trouble communicating across the generations. Why do these pairs, who seem so similar, have so much difficulty talking to each other? Do you identify with one of these characters more than the others? If so, why?
2. Many of the characters in the book, like Manning Chilton and Prudence Bartlett, are heavily constrained by their social class. Which character has the fewest choices because of his or her social position? Which character has the most choices? Do the twentieth-century characters have more freedom than the seventeenth and eighteenth century characters, or less?
3. Most of the main characters in *Physick Book* are women. How have women's roles changed from the seventeenth century to the twentieth century? What about their obligations? Their opportunities?
4. Connie is a historian, who likes to interpret the past in light of the present. Sam, however, is a preservationist: he likes to maintain what still exists from the past, at the expense of the present. Are you more of a historian, or a preservationist? Do you see a difference between Connie's and Sam's feeling about the past?
5. How do some of the buildings, like Saltonstall Court, the Harvard Faculty Club, and the Milk Street house, function as *de facto* characters in the story?
6. Arlo seems only to show up when something unusual is about to happen. Does Arlo exist? Is his existence exclusively in relationship to Connie, or does he exist on his own terms? What does Arlo imply about relationships in general?
7. What role does religion play in *Physick Book*? Is Christianity contradictory or complementary to magic in this story? Is Wicca more like magic, more like Christianity, or is it something else entirely?
8. Do you think magic, as represented in this book, exists in the real world? If so, how do you think it manifests itself?
9. Before the Scientific Revolution, alchemists reasoned by analogy, instead of by deduction. They saw a symbolic relationship between the heavens, the earth, the elements, and the human body. Can you think of any examples of people continuing to reason by analogy today?
10. *Physick Book* seems to hold a contradictory position towards ambition and achievement. Some characters, like Connie, have their ambition rewarded, but others, like Manning Chilton, are thwarted. Is ambition a virtue, or a vice?
11. *Physick Book* is the latest entry in a long bibliography of writing about witchcraft at Salem. Why do you think we are still so enthralled by this moment in history? What does Salem have

to teach us about our culture today?

12. Historians differ on what precisely caused the Salem witch panic to grow so disproportionately relative to other colonial-era witch trials. Some blame infighting between a rural town and its bustling seaport; some point to the violence of the Indian wars along the Maine frontier; some even blame the hallucinatory effects of moldy rye. What do you think was the ultimate cause of the Salem panic?
13. Deliverance has a chance to escape with her daughter the night before she is set to be put to death. Why does she make the choice that she makes?
14. Near the end of the story, we learn that having the talent for witchcraft comes at a pretty steep price. Would you like to be a witch, as represented in *Physick Book*? Why or why not?
15. If Connie has a daughter some day, what do you think her name will be?