

A BOOK CLUB
READER'S GUIDE

THE MAGDALENE DECEPTION

The Magdalene Chronicles · Book One

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*A guide for discussion groups, libraries, and reading circles,
with a synopsis, character notes, the history behind the story,
and questions to carry the conversation long past the final page.*

LITERATI EDITIONS

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WELCOME TO THE GUIDE

A note for readers and discussion leaders

“I am Mariam of Magdala.”

THE FIRST WORDS OF THE PAPYRUS

Five words on a sheet of ancient papyrus, hidden in an attic in the foothills of the French Pyrenees, and a young Vatican archivist finds the ground shifting beneath everything he has been taught to believe. The Magdalene Deception is a thriller, and it moves like one, but it is also a novel about what institutions do with inconvenient truths, what faith looks like when it has to survive contact with evidence, and what one honest person owes to history when the rest of the world would prefer he stay quiet.

This guide is meant to help your group get the most from the novel. It opens with a synopsis and a cast of principal characters, then offers a brief tour of the real history the story draws upon, before turning to discussion questions arranged by theme. Groups with limited time may wish to choose one or two themes rather than working through every question. A closing section suggests ways to enrich your meeting and points toward the books that follow.

A word of caution: the synopsis and many of the questions discuss the full arc of the story, including its final revelations. If your group prefers to come to the novel fresh, we suggest reading the book before opening this guide.

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I. THE STORY IN BRIEF

A synopsis of the novel, revelations included

The novel opens in March 1244 on the fog-bound summit of Montségur, the last Cathar fortress in the Languedoc, as a ten-month siege by the pope's crusaders draws to its bitter end. Before the defenders surrender to the flames, a handful of them slip down the mountain under cover of a truce, carrying away something the Church has spent a generation trying to seize. What they hide, and where, becomes the seed of everything that follows.

Nearly eight centuries later, Father Michael Dominic arrives in Rome to take up a post in the Vatican Secret Archives. Young, brilliant, and instinctively curious, he has been shaped less by his absent father than by his mentor, Cardinal Enrico Petrini, the man he has called Uncle Rico since childhood. Dominic's new superior, the gentle Brother Calvino Mendoza, introduces him to the Miscellanea, the vast underground galleries where centuries of uncatalogued paper wait in the dark, and to the Riserva, the locked chamber where the Church keeps what it least wishes to see.

It is there, in a hollow box disguised as a book, that Dominic finds two documents bound together across the centuries: a parchment of unknown quatrains in the hand of Nostradamus, dated 1566, and a 1902 letter from Abbé Bérenger Saunière of Rennes-le-Château, politely reminding the Vatican Secretary of State that payments are overdue for "our matter of special importance to the Holy Mother Church." Saunière, it seems, was being paid to keep something quiet. Dominic wants to know what.

His search draws in Simon Ginzberg, an elderly Jewish scholar with a lifetime's knowledge of Grail legends and papal prophecy, and Hana Sinclair, an investigative journalist for *Le Monde* whose grandfather, the Parisian banker Baron Armand de Saint-Clair, moves in circles that reach the pope himself. Hana is pursuing her own story about the flow of stolen Jewish assets through French and Swiss banks during the war, and about the Church's complicity in it. Their two investigations, it turns out, are one.

A trip to Paris and then to the Languedoc, where an elderly niece of Saunière's housekeeper still keeps the priest's effects in her attic, yields the object at the center of the mystery: a first-century papyrus in Koine Greek. Working through the translation aboard the Saint-Clair jet, Dominic reads the words that will unsettle his faith and, if made public, the faith of a billion others. The writer identifies herself as Mariam of Magdala. She calls Jesus her husband. She writes that his resurrection was of the spirit, not the body, and that she and Joseph of Arimathea carried his remains out of Judea to Gaul.

Dominic and Hana are not alone in their discovery. Cardinal Fabrizio Dante, the ambitious Vatican Secretary of State, has had their movements watched and their email intercepted through Petrov Gović, an Interpol agent in Lyon who is also, in secret, the leader of the Novi Ustasha, a revived Croatian fascist movement descended from the wartime regime his father once served. Gović wants the papyrus not to protect the Church but to extort it, and the price he names is a fortune in Ustasha gold that has sat in the Vatican Bank since 1944.

When Gović lures Hana to a warehouse in Tor Bella Monaca, Rome's most dangerous quarter, and offers her life in exchange for the original manuscript, Dominic turns to his friend Karl Dengler of the Swiss Guard. Dengler, Lukas Bischoff, and Finn Bachman go in with him. In the violence that follows, Dominic kills Gović with the man's own knife, an act that will haunt him long after the wound on his arm has healed.

The aftermath reshapes the Vatican. Petrini, having brought the matter to the pope, confronts Dante with his crimes and takes his place as Secretary of State; Dante departs for an archbishopric in Buenos Aires, already contemplating his next move. The Ustasha gold is returned to the descendants of those it was stolen from in a private ceremony attended by the French president. The Swiss Guards receive medals they cannot fully explain. And the papyrus of Mary Magdalene, by the pope's decision, goes back into the Riserva, hidden in a niche only Dominic knows, its truth deferred rather than denied.

In the closing pages, deep in a limestone cave near Périllos in southern France, a common adder settles in for the winter atop an ancient iron-bound reliquary that no living person has yet found. The Chronicles have only begun.

II. PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Who's who in the novel

Father Michael Dominic

A newly appointed archivist in the Vatican Secret Archives, in his early thirties, raised in New York by a devout mother and never knowing his father. Gifted with languages and a scholar's instinct for paper, Dominic is also a social introvert who trusts few people fully. His faith is real but restless, and the novel tests whether curiosity and belief can survive in the same man.

Hana Sinclair

An investigative journalist for *Le Monde*, granddaughter of Baron Armand de Saint-Clair and goddaughter of the French president. Hana is fearless, well connected, and slightly embarrassed by the wealth that surrounds her. Her pursuit of a story about Nazi-era gold puts her on a collision course with the same enemies Dominic has unknowingly awakened.

Cardinal Enrico Petrini

Dominic's mentor and lifelong father figure, an American cardinal of enormous stature within the Church and, by the novel's end, Vatican Secretary of State. Petrini is a man of conscience who nonetheless carries secrets of his own from the war years.

Cardinal Fabrizio Dante

The sitting Vatican Secretary of State when the story opens: ambitious, cold, and willing to enlist fascist mercenaries to protect the institution he believes he serves. His downfall is a demotion rather than a defeat, and he leaves the stage plotting.

Petrov Gović

An Interpol agent based in Lyon and, secretly, the head of the Novi Ustasha. The son of a wartime Ustasha leader, Gović is intelligent, patient, and mercenary to the core. He wants the papyrus as leverage for gold, not as an article of faith.

Brother Calvino Mendoza

The Prefect of the Secret Archives, a small, kindly Franciscan who calls Dominic “Miguel” and gives him the key to the Riserva. His trust is the door through which the entire story walks.

Simon Ginzberg

A professor emeritus at Teller University outside Rome and a survivor of Dachau, expert in Grail legends, Nostradamus, and the prophecy of Saint Malachy. Ginzberg is the novel’s intellectual conscience, quick to warn Dominic how zealously the Church will guard what he has found.

Baron Armand de Saint-Clair

Hana’s grandfather, a Parisian banker with a private jet, a suite at the Rome Cavalieri, and a wartime past in which the “migration” of Vatican gold, and a Resistance fighter known as Achille, loom large.

Karl Dengler, Lukas Bischoff, and Finn Bachman

Corporals of the Pontifical Swiss Guard. Dengler is Dominic’s running partner and closest friend in Rome; all three risk their careers and their lives to bring Hana out of Tor Bella Monaca.

Roko Sirola

Gović’s enforcer and chief recruiter for the Novi Ustasha, a man with a safecracker’s toolkit and no discernible conscience.

Élise Dénarnaud

The elderly niece of Marie Dénarnaud, Abbé Saunière’s housekeeper, living quietly near Rennes-le-Château with a wooden tube in her attic that she has never thought to open.

III. THE HISTORY BEHIND THE FICTION

Where the record ends and the novel begins

Gary McAvoy closes each of his novels with a section titled “Fiction, Fact, or Fusion?” that walks readers through what is documented and what is invented. Groups often find that the pleasure of the book deepens when they know how much of its scaffolding is real. The notes below summarize the principal threads; the author’s own afterword offers more.

Montségur and the Cathars

The fortress on its Pyrenean peak is a real place, and the Albigensian Crusade launched by Pope Innocent III in 1209 devastated the Languedoc much as the prologue describes. The final siege of Montségur ended in March 1244, and the story that a few Cathars escaped with a treasure during the truce is part of the enduring legend. The activities the novel assigns to Abbé Marty, a genuine Cathar cleric, are fictional.

Bérenger Saunière and Rennes-le-Château

Saunière was indeed the parish priest of Rennes-le-Château in the late nineteenth century, and he did come into unexplained wealth that he spent lavishly on his church and grounds. His housekeeper, Marie Dénarnaud, was real. So is his Last Will and Testament, which the author tracked down for the book. What Saunière actually found, and what the 1902 letter to Cardinal Rampolla implies, are the novel’s inventions.

The Vatican Secret Archives and the Riserva

The Archives, the Miscellanea, and the Riserva all exist. Because no photographs or public descriptions of the Riserva are available, the room in the novel is the author’s imagining of what such a place would need to be.

Nostradamus and Saint Malachy

Both were historical figures, and Malachy’s prophecy of the popes, ending with “Peter the Roman,” is genuine. The quatrains Dominic discovers in the Riserva are fictional.

The Gospel of Mary

A Coptic text discovered in Cairo in 1896 does describe Mary Magdalene’s relationship with Jesus and the other apostles from her own perspective. The first-century papyrus in the Magdalene’s own hand, and everything it says, is entirely fiction.

The Ustasha and the Vatican Bank

The Ustasha governed the Independent State of Croatia during the Second World War with a brutality that shocked even the Nazis. The Vatican maintained diplomatic relations with the regime, and the postwar “ratline” that helped fascists escape Europe ran partly through Franciscan channels. Accounts of Ustasha gold being melted and deposited in the Vatican Bank are part of the documented record. The Novi Ustasha of the novel, and the Gović family, are invented.

ECHELON, hotel safes, and AirTags

ECHELON is a real signals-intelligence program of the Five Eyes nations, though its inner workings here are the author’s conjecture. The safe-cracking tools Roko Sirola uses can be bought by anyone. And the AirTag that saves Hana’s life was written into the book a full year before Apple released the product, a bet on a rumored name that happened to pay off.

IV. QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Arranged by theme; choose the threads that suit your group

FAITH, TRUTH, AND THE MANUSCRIPT

- 01 Before he reads a word of the papyrus, Dominic reflects that his faith has always been “more of an accepted assumption rather than an unquestioning premise.” How does this distinction shape the way he responds to what the Magdalene writes? Would a priest of more unquestioning belief have acted differently?
- 02 The manuscript makes two claims: that Jesus and Mary Magdalene were married, and that the resurrection was of the spirit rather than the body. Which of the two does the novel treat as more dangerous to the Church, and why? Which would be more unsettling to you?
- 03 Dominic tells Hana that a discovery of this magnitude ought to be shared, yet he also asks her to keep it between them. Where is the line between prudence and suppression? Does he ever cross it?
- 04 Simon Ginzberg predicts that the Vatican will “zealously” try to quash the document. Is he proven right? How does the novel distinguish between Dante’s methods and the pope’s eventual decision?
- 05 Walking in the papal gardens, Dominic weighs releasing the manuscript against the havoc it could wreak on “a billion Catholic souls.” Is there a moral difference between concealing a truth and simply choosing not to announce it? Whose interests does silence serve?

THE VATICAN AND THE USES OF POWER

- 06 Cardinal Dante believes he is protecting the Church. Gović wants only leverage and gold. Which man does the novel present as more dangerous, and is Dante’s sincerity a mitigation or an aggravation of what he does?
- 07 Ginzberg notes that a seventeenth-century archivist named Gonfalonieri hid provocative documents rather than destroy them, so that they might never be found and yet never be lost. Is that a coward’s compromise or a form of stewardship? How does Dominic’s final act in the Riserva echo it?
- 08 The novel places the Church in an unbroken line from the Albigensian Crusade to Saunière’s hush money to the Ustasha gold. Is this portrait fair to the institution? Does the presence of men like Petrini and Mendoza balance the picture?
- 09 Petrini insists that the fate of the papyrus “has to be his decision,” meaning the pope’s. Do you agree that such a decision belongs to one man? Who, if anyone, has the standing to decide what history the world is allowed to know?

MICHAEL DOMINIC

- 10 Dominic was born out of wedlock, taunted as a boy, and raised to self-reliance and solitude. How do these early wounds surface in the adult priest? Do they make him a better investigator, a worse colleague, or both?
- 11 Petrini twice scolds Dominic for overstepping his authority even as he praises the results. Is Dominic reckless, or is his willingness to open the false-bottomed box exactly the quality the Church needs and fears?
- 12 In the warehouse, Dominic kills Petrov Gović and immediately asks himself, “In God’s name, what have I done?” How does the novel handle a priest who takes a life? Should it have lingered longer on the consequences?
- 13 The last time we see Dominic alone, he is hiding the papyrus and wondering “what else lay in store for him.” Has he changed over the course of the book? What has he lost, and what has he gained?

HANA SINCLAIR AND THE WEIGHT OF INHERITANCE

- 14 Hana is embarrassed by the trappings of her family’s wealth yet uses them freely: the jet, the hotel suite, the access to presidents and popes. Does the novel let her have it both ways, or does it examine the tension honestly?
- 15 Her grandfather asks her to keep two secrets: the Vatican gold operation and the identity of Achille. She agrees without hesitation. Is this loyalty, complicity, or simply good judgment? Would a journalist of her caliber really have agreed so readily?
- 16 Hana walks into Tor Bella Monaca alone because she believes an Interpol agent must be trustworthy. What does her mistake say about the difference between institutional credentials and personal character, a theme the novel returns to repeatedly?
- 17 The attraction between Hana and Dominic is acknowledged but never acted upon, ending with a kiss on the cheek and the words “Another time.” Did you find this restraint satisfying or frustrating? What does the story gain by leaving it unresolved?

HISTORY, COMPLICITY, AND MEMORY

- 18 The prologue and the modern story are separated by nearly eight hundred years, yet both turn on a Church willing to kill or conceal to protect itself. Did the medieval frame change how you read the contemporary chapters?
- 19 Saint-Clair tells Hana that after the Roman Jews paid the Nazis’ ransom in gold, more than a thousand were deported anyway, “and still, the pope said nothing.” How does the novel use this true episode? Does it risk letting the fictional plot borrow the moral weight of real suffering?
- 20 The Ustasha gold is returned in a private ceremony rather than a public reckoning. Is a quiet restitution better than none? What is lost when history is repaired without being acknowledged?
- 21 Gović signs off his calls with the old Ustasha salute, “For the homeland, ready!” How does the novel portray the persistence of fascist movements across generations? Did the Novi Ustasha feel like a

plausible modern threat?

CRAFT, STRUCTURE, AND STYLE

- 22 The author is meticulous about real places, restaurants, flight times, and technical procedure, from spectrometers to hotel-safe default codes. How did this density of detail affect your reading? Where did it heighten suspense, and where might it have slowed the pace?
- 23 Much of the novel's exposition arrives through conversation: Petrini over pasta, Ginzberg in his darkened office, Saint-Clair over an aperitif. Which of these scenes did you find most effective as storytelling, and why?
- 24 Dominic translates the papyrus aboard the jet in a scene built around the deciphering of a single Greek word. Why do you think the author chose to slow the narrative down at precisely this moment?
- 25 The epilogue leaves a snake coiled on an undiscovered reliquary. What did you make of this ending? Does it satisfy as a conclusion to this book, as a promise of the next, or both?
- 26 The "Fiction, Fact, or Fusion?" afterword invites readers to check the author's work. Did you read it? Did it change your feelings about the story, and would you want other novelists to offer the same transparency?

THE BIGGER QUESTIONS

- 27 If the papyrus were real and you alone had found it, what would you do with it?
- 28 Dominic concludes that Christianity "is more than any one miracle." Is a faith that can survive the loss of its central miracle stronger or weaker than one that cannot?
- 29 Every major institution in the novel, the Church, Interpol, the banks, is shown harboring people who betray its purpose. Does the book leave you cynical about institutions, or hopeful about individuals within them?

V. THEMES WORTH PURSUING

Threads your group may wish to follow across the series

Truth and Its Custodians

Who owns a historical fact? The archivist who finds it, the institution that paid to bury it, or the world it would change? The novel returns again and again to people who hold knowledge in trust and must decide what that trust requires.

Faith Under Pressure

Dominic's belief bends without breaking; Mendoza, when he later learns the truth, is nearly shattered by it. The Chronicles are in part a study of how differently people carry the same revelation.

The Long Shadow of the War

Stolen gold, escaped fascists, and a Church that looked away: the Second World War is never far from the surface, and the sins of 1944 are collected, with interest, in the present day.

Chosen Family

A fatherless priest and his cardinal mentor; a journalist and the grandfather who raised her; three Swiss Guards who would follow a friend into the dark. The bonds that matter most in the novel are made, not inherited.

The Ethics of Concealment

From Gonfalonieri's hidden documents to the pope's final directive, the book asks whether some truths are best kept in a locked room, and who gets to hold the key.

VI. ENRICHING YOUR MEETING

Ideas for hosts

Set the table like Rome. Dominic and Petrini share antipasti, *carciofini* in peppered olive oil, and a bottle of Chianti Classico at a noisy trattoria near the Vatican. A simple Roman-inspired spread, or a French one in honor of Hana's Paris, gives the evening a sense of place.

Play "Fiction, Fact, or Fusion?" Before revealing the author's afterword, have each member guess which elements of the story are real: Saunière's will, the ECHELON program, the Riserva, the Nostradamus quatrains, the Gospel of Mary. The answers usually surprise someone.

Trace the journey. Pull up Montségur, Rennes-le-Château, the Bibliothèque nationale, Ciampino Airport, and Tor Bella Monaca on a map. The author built his settings with Google Earth, and seeing the terrain makes the geography of the chase come alive.

Read the primary sources. The Gospel of Mary is short and freely available in translation, as is Saint Malachy's prophecy of the popes. Reading either alongside the novel opens rich conversation about how fiction borrows from and reshapes its sources.

Visit the Codex Personae. The author maintains a free reader's companion with backgrounds on every principal character across the series. A link appears in the closing pages of this guide.

VII. CONTINUING THE JOURNEY

Where the story goes next

The Magdalene Deception is the first book of The Magdalene Chronicles, a trilogy completed by *The Magdalene Reliquary* and *The Magdalene Veil*. The reliquary glimpsed in the epilogue, the revived Ustasha, and the question of what the Church will do with a truth it has chosen to bury all carry forward. Brother Mendoza's eventual discovery of the papyrus in the Riserva, and the crisis of faith it provokes in him, opens the second book.

Michael Dominic and Hana Sinclair go on to anchor the Vatican Secret Archive Thrillers, a long-running series that includes *The Vivaldi Cipher*, *The Opus Dictum*, *The Petrus Prophecy*, *The Avignon Affair*, *The Jerusalem Scrolls*, *The Galileo Gambit*, *The Celestial Guardian*, *The Confessions of Pope Joan*, *The Apostle Conspiracy*, *The Hildegard Seeds*, *The Devil's Symphony*, *The Voynich Codex*, and *The Medici Heresy*, with new titles continuing to appear. A companion series, the Vatican Archaeology Thrillers, begins with *Covenant of the Iron Cross*. Readers who have wondered about Dominic's absent father, about Cardinal Dante in Buenos Aires, or about the reliquary under its limestone slab will find their patience rewarded.

YOUR FREE READER'S COMPANION

Codex Personae gathers comprehensive backgrounds and biographical details for every principal character in The Magdalene Chronicles, the Vatican Secret Archive Thrillers, and the Vatican Archaeology series. It is offered free to readers, with the author's compliments, at books.garymcavoy.com/jphbb0ftjb.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gary McAvoy is the author of the Magdalene Chronicles, the Vatican Secret Archive Thrillers, and the Vatican Archaeology Thrillers, historical suspense novels that draw on the hidden corners of Church history and the enduring question of what happens when faith meets evidence. His books are published by Literati Editions and have been translated into French, German, and Spanish. He is also the author of the nonfiction work *And Every Word Is True*, an investigation into Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*.

A lifelong collector of rare books and manuscripts, McAvoy builds his settings from real rooms, real streets, and real protocols. He lives in Washington State, where he writes daily and answers every reader who takes the time to write to him.

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PUBLISHER	Literati Editions · Bremerton, Washington

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