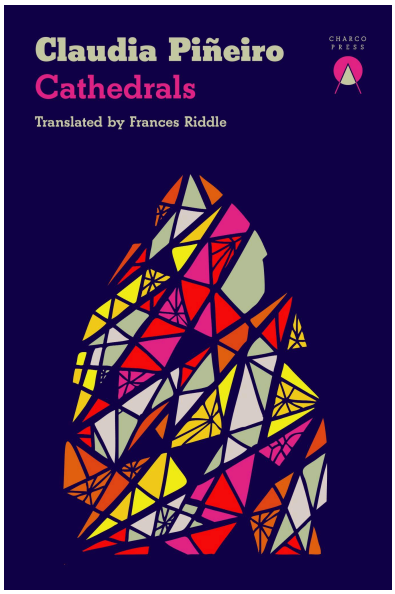
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Reading Guide

Cathedrals

Author: Claudia Piñeiro

Translator: Frances Riddle



Please be aware that this discussion guide contains spoilers.

Short Context Note for Readers

Cathedrals is set in contemporary Argentina, a country where Catholicism has historically played a central role in shaping social norms, family structures, and political debates – particularly around gender, sexuality, and reproductive rights. While Argentina is constitutionally secular, the Catholic Church has long exerted strong cultural and institutional influence, especially within the middle and upper-middle classes portrayed in the novel.

One key backdrop to the novel is Argentina's intense and polarising debate around abortion. Until December 2020, abortion was illegal in most circumstances, forcing many women into clandestine and unsafe procedures. The novel reflects the moral rigidity, hypocrisy, and silences that surrounded these debates for decades, as well as the unequal ways in which class and power determined who suffered consequences and who was protected.

Short Summary of the Novel

Cathedrals centres on the long-buried disappearance and death of Ana, a teenage girl from a respectable, Catholic Argentinian family. The novel unfolds through multiple perspectives and timeframes, gradually reconstructing the events surrounding Ana's fate and the network of silences that allowed injustice to persist.

As family members, professionals, and authority figures recount their versions of the past, Piñeiro exposes how religious dogma, patriarchal power, class privilege, and fear of social scandal converge to obscure truth. Rather than focusing on a single crime, the novel interrogates the broader moral failures – personal, familial, and institutional – that made that crime possible.

Through its fragmented structure, *Cathedrals* asks not only who is responsible for Ana's death, but who chose not to see, not to act, and not to speak – and why.

Why Read This Novel Now?

Cathedrals speaks powerfully to contemporary debates around gendered violence, reproductive rights, institutional accountability, and the persistence of moral conservatism beneath apparently liberal societies. While set in Argentina, the novel's questions about who is believed, whose bodies are regulated, and how institutions protect themselves at the expense of the vulnerable resonate strongly in a UK and US context shaped by discussions of consent, safeguarding failures, and systemic misogyny.

At a time when rights once thought secure are being publicly questioned again – both globally and closer to home – Piñeiro's novel offers a stark reminder that injustice is rarely the result of a single act, but of collective silence, compliance, and moral cowardice. Reading *Cathedrals* now invites English-speaking readers to reflect not only on other societies, but on their own.

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Discussion Questions

1. **Narrative structure and point of view**
   Cathedrals unfolds through multiple voices, documents, and temporal shifts. How does this fragmented structure shape your reading experience? In what ways does it mirror the novel's central concern with truth, secrecy, and the impossibility of a single, authoritative account of events?

   The contents page of *Cathedrals* presents us with a list of characters, who are each given their own section and tell part of the story from their own perspective. Who do you consider to be the novel's 'main' character?

2. **Absence and silence**
   At the centre of the novel is the disappearance of Ana. How does Piñeiro construct Ana's presence through absence? What kinds of silences – familial, social, institutional – surround her, and how do these silences function as forms of violence?

3. **Religion and moral authority**
   The novel engages critically with Catholicism and religious conservatism in Argentina. How are religious institutions and beliefs portrayed? Do they offer moral clarity, control, comfort, or something more troubling? How might this resonate – or clash – with a readership less shaped by institutional Catholicism?

4. **Gender, power, and control**
   How does *Cathedrals* depict the regulation of women's bodies, desires, and choices? Consider the roles assigned to daughters, mothers, and wives. In what ways is patriarchy enforced both overtly and subtly?

5. **Family as a site of conflict**
   Discuss the family dynamics at the heart of the novel. How do loyalty, shame, love, and fear coexist within the family? To what extent is the family a space of protection, and to what extent a space of harm?

6. **Justice and its limits**
   The novel repeatedly raises the question of justice – legal, moral, and emotional. Who seeks justice, and on whose terms? Does the novel suggest that justice is achievable, or only partial and deeply compromised?

7. **Class and social respectability**
   How do class, education, and social standing shape the characters' actions and the consequences they face? Who is believed, protected, or ignored – and why?

8. **Motherhood and responsibility**
   Motherhood appears in complex and often contradictory ways throughout the novel. How are mothers judged by society, by others, and by themselves? Is motherhood portrayed as power, burden, expectation, or all three?

9. **Male authority figures**
   Discuss the role of fathers, priests, doctors, and other male figures of authority. How do they exercise power, and how are they shielded or challenged? What patterns emerge across these different figures?

10. **Truth, denial, and complicity**
    Several characters choose not to see, not to ask, or not to act. How does the novel explore complicity – not only through perpetrators, but through bystanders? What is the cost of denial?

11. **Violence beyond the physical**
    While acts of physical violence are central to the plot, the novel also depicts psychological, emotional, and institutional violence. Which forms struck you as most damaging, and why?

12. **Time, memory, and reckoning**
    The novel moves back and forth in time, slowly revealing buried truths. How does this temporal structure affect suspense and emotional impact? What does the novel suggest about memory and delayed reckoning?

13. **The title: *Cathedrals***
    Why do you think Piñeiro chose this title? What do "cathedrals" symbolise in the novel – faith, power, permanence, patriarchy, hypocrisy? How does the metaphor evolve as the story unfolds?

14. **Endings and aftermath**
    Consider the novel's ending. Does it offer resolution, accountability, or closure? How did it leave you feeling – as a reader and as a moral witness to the story? What questions remain deliberately unanswered?