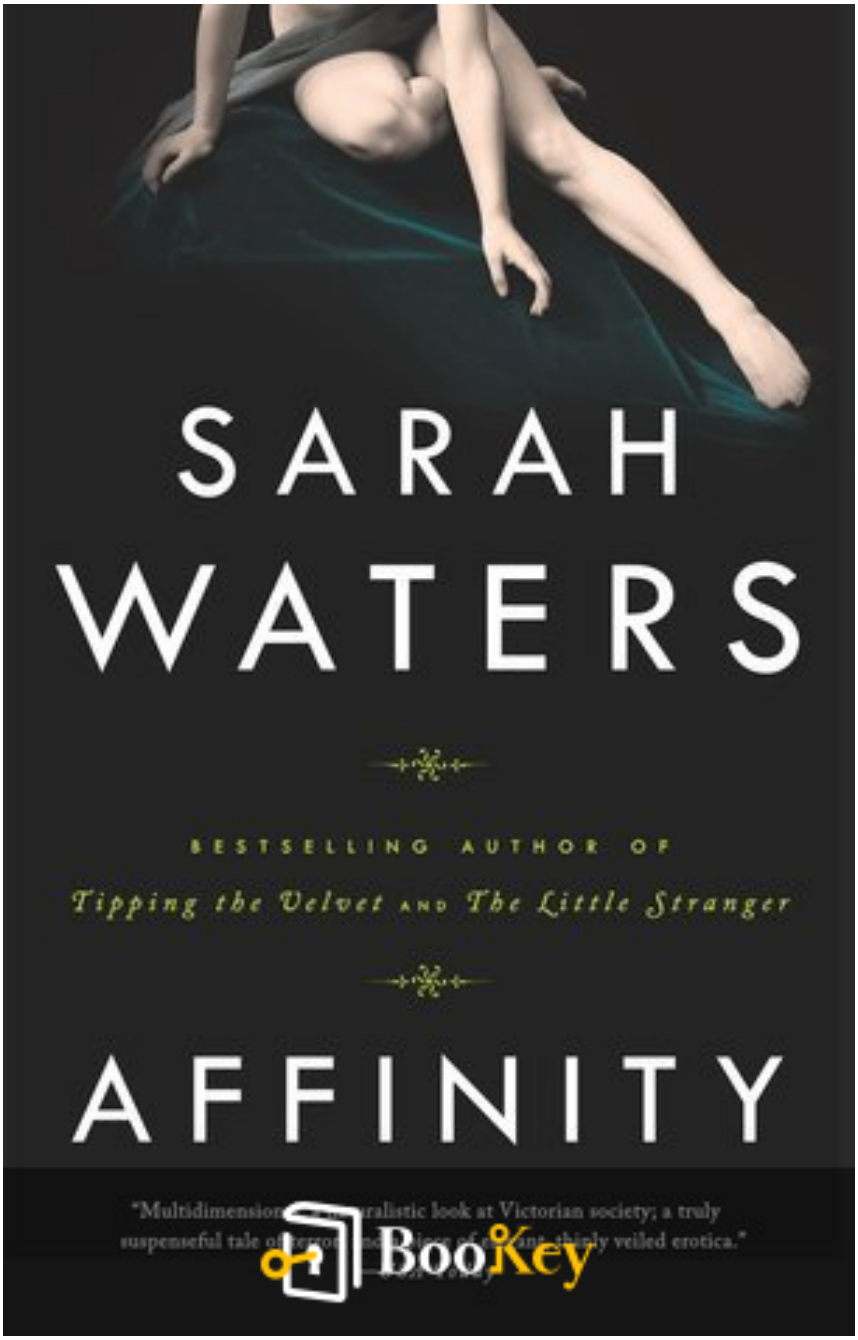
Affinity PDF (Limited Copy)

Sarah Waters



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Affinity Summary

Love and longing in a Victorian women's prison.

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About the book

In Sarah Waters' haunting novel "Affinity," the boundaries between reality and the supernatural blur as we delve into the emotionally charged world of Victorian England, where desires are suffocated by societal expectations. The story follows Margaret Prior, a disenchanted upper-class woman mourning the recent death of her father, who finds solace in the grim confines of a women's prison, where she becomes captivated by the enigmatic figure of Selina Dawes, a spiritual medium imprisoned for fraudulent practices. As their connection deepens, Margaret is drawn into a web of passion, secrets, and the occult, raising poignant questions about identity, freedom, and the hidden desires of the human heart. With its rich historical backdrop and exploration of love in its many forms, "Affinity" entices readers to uncover the layers of repression and yearning that define its characters, compelling them to question where loyalty ends and genuine connection begins.

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About the author

Sarah Waters is a celebrated British author known for her compelling historical novels that explore themes of sexuality, identity, and social class. Born in 1966 in Wales, Waters has garnered critical acclaim for her richly woven narratives set in Victorian and early 20th-century England. Her works often feature complex female characters and delve into the intricacies of lesbian relationships, challenging the conventions of their respective eras. Waters' skillful storytelling and meticulous research have earned her multiple awards, solidifying her position as a significant voice in contemporary literature. Notable titles include "Fingersmith" and "Tipping the Velvet," but it is her haunting novel "Affinity" that continues to captivate readers with its exploration of spiritualism and the struggles for self-identity.

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Chapter 1 Summary: 1

In Chapter 1 of "Affinity" by Sarah Waters, we are introduced to the protagonist, Margaret Prior, who is navigating life after the death of her father. Set in Victorian England, the story opens with Margaret reflecting on her visit to the ominous Millbank Prison, where she has begun her work as a visitor to the incarcerated women. She draws a vivid picture of the prison's architecture, feeling both fear and fascination as she approaches its gates. Margaret's thoughts often drift to her late father, seeking his wisdom and approval in her new endeavor.

As she enters Millbank, accompanied by Mr. Shillitoe, a visitor with a certain authority over the prison, she experiences a mix of dread and curiosity. The chapter describes first impressions of the prison's stark reality: the corridors are filled with ominous echoes, and the air is thick with a sour stench—a harbinger of the darkness that envelops the inmates. Through her encounters with warders and matrons, such as Miss Ridley and Miss Haxby, we learn about the harsh conditions within the prison as well as the routines that govern both the inmates and the staff.

Margaret visits the women in their cells, feeling a sense of duty to uplift them through her presence. She meets several prisoners, including the despairing Mary Ann Cook, who murdered her baby, and Ellen Power, who seems to have been in Millbank for a long time, perhaps longer than she

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should. A meeting with the enigmatic Selina Dawes stands out, a woman charged with fraud and assault, who claims to have connections to the spirit world. Dawes intrigues Margaret, and they share a moment of mutual understanding, though it is tinged with the weight of their respective pasts.

Themes of isolation, despair, and the search for connection permeate the chapter. Margaret grapples with her own feelings of emptiness and the expectations placed upon her by her mother and society. There's a notable juxtaposition between the mundane life outside Millbank and the grim existence within its walls. Additionally, the chapter raises questions about spirituality and the blurred lines between reality and belief, especially through Dawes' character, hinting at a deeper mystery that may unfold.

Overall, Chapter 1 sets the stage for a tale exploring grief, isolation, and the haunting memories of past choices, drawing the reader into the complex lives of both Margaret and the women confined within Millbank.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: The Power of Human Connection in the Face of Isolation

Critical Interpretation: As you navigate your own challenges, let the story of Margaret Prior resonate within you, reminding you that even in the darkest places, the human spirit seeks connection. Like her, you may face moments of despair or loneliness, yet reaching out to others—be it with a kind word, a listening ear, or a shared experience—can illuminate the path forward. Lives intertwined, even those seemingly distant, hold the potential to uplift and transform your perspective. In embracing the power of empathy and understanding, you can rise above isolation and foster relationships that nourish your soul.

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Chapter 2 Summary: 2

In Chapter 2 of "Affinity" by Sarah Waters, the protagonist, a woman named Maud, reflects on the cold and foggy winter of 1874 in London, drawing parallels to a previous time when her father was ill. The atmosphere is bleak, filled with tales of poverty and suffering, haunting her thoughts as she navigates a city that feels heavy with despair. Amidst this gloom, Maud finds herself increasingly captivated by the supernatural, particularly the burgeoning world of spiritualism.

One day, while wandering through fog-laden streets, she stumbles upon a spiritualist association, where she is both intrigued and repulsed by the strange displays of mediums. She meets Mr. Hither and Miss Kislingbury, who introduce her to the oddities of the spiritualist world, including a cabinet containing eerie wax molds representing deceased spirits, including a chilling hand that belonged to Selina Dawes, a notorious medium.

Maud learns that Selina has been imprisoned, sparking her curiosity and concern. Mr. Hither explains Selina’s highly publicized trial and her subsequent fall from grace, a narrative fueled by sensationalism and societal judgement. For Maud, Selina transforms from a mere name to a person whose plight resonates deeply within her.

As Maud delves further into Selina's story, she discovers the darker sides of

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spiritualism—the struggles of women like Selina, who were marginalized and misunderstood. The chapter reveals Maud's internal conflict as she grapples with the liminal space between reality and the supernatural, while also questioning societal norms surrounding women and their roles.

The chapter is rich with themes of despair, the supernatural, and the feminine experience, encapsulated in Maud's journey of exploration and her growing obsession with Selina, who represents both vulnerability and power. Ultimately, Maud is drawn into Selina's world, sensing an affinity that promises deeper connections yet also warns of the dangers that lurk in the shadows.

Key Element	Description
Protagonist	Maud
Setting	Winter of 1874, London, characterized by cold, fog, and a sense of despair
Themes	Despair, supernatural, feminine experience, societal judgment
Initial Conflict	Maud reflects on her father's illness while grappling with the bleakness of society
Discovery	Maud discovers a spiritualist association and is drawn to its oddities
Key Characters Introduced	Mr. Hither, Miss Kislingbury, Selina Dawes
Key Object	Eerie wax molds representing deceased spirits

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Key Element	Description
Selina Dawes' Significance	Represents vulnerability and societal struggle for marginalized women
Maud's Transformation	From curiosity to obsession with Selina's story and the world of spiritualism
Conclusion of Chapter	Maud's internal conflict grows as she navigates her affinity for Selina and the supernatural

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: Societal Misunderstanding of Women

Critical Interpretation: As you traverse your own life, let Maud's connection to Selina Dawes inspire you to reflect on the often-misunderstood struggles of those around you, particularly women whose voices may be overshadowed by societal judgment. Acknowledging the complexities of their experiences can cultivate empathy, pushing you to stand against the narratives that diminish others' realities. Just like Maud was transformed by her understanding of Selina's plight, you too can foster deeper relationships and advocate for those who are marginalized, turning awareness into action.

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Chapter 3: 3

In Chapter 3 of "Affinity" by Sarah Waters, the narrative unfolds in the aftermath of the protagonist Margaret Prior's sister Priscilla's wedding. The chapter opens with reflections on loss, as it's been two years since their father died. Priscilla has now married Arthur Barclay and will be going abroad, leaving Margaret and her mother, Mrs. Prior, to navigate their loneliness. This shift marks a change in family dynamics; Margaret feels the burden of supporting her mother, who seems to perceive Margaret more as a consolation than a daughter.

Margaret's relationship with her mother is complex and strained. While Mrs. Prior clings to Margaret as a source of comfort, Margaret feels suffocated and trapped in her role. She keeps busy with reading to her mother, but the dread of becoming like her mother—old, querulous, and alone—looms heavily over her. Their home feels increasingly empty with Priscilla's departure, and Margaret's sense of her own identity shrinks in the shadow of her sister's traditional path.

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Chapter 4 Summary: 4

In this poignant chapter, Margaret Prior becomes increasingly consumed by her desire to help Selina, a woman she has fallen deeply in love with during Margaret's secret visits to Millbank Prison. The chapter opens on December 21, 1874, with Margaret experiencing subtle signs of Selina's presence in her home—a crooked ornament, an ajar closet, and indentations on cushions—intangible tokens of a bond that transcends physical circumstances. This connection feels vital to Margaret, who fears losing it even as she begins to plan a perilous escape for Selina.

Margaret's relationship with her mother evolves; her mother believes Margaret is recovering after their recent separation, unaware of her daughter's clandestine visits to the prison. Margaret's mind races with plans to help Selina escape, and she grapples with the moral complexities of abandoning her old life—including her fraught relationships with family—and embracing a new, uncertain future in Italy with Selina.

Their meetings become more urgent as they discuss practical needs for their flight: money, clothes, tickets, and identification papers, highlighting the risks they face. Selina's spirit remains strong despite her suffering, and her resolve inspires Margaret. The two women talk about the emotional and physical preparations necessary for their escape, culminating in a beautiful yet tense moment where Selina expresses that their connection stems from

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love and desire, not magic.

Events build tension: Margaret receives news that her family will soon be going on holiday, an opportunity she must seize for her plans. The duality of her emotions becomes evident as she recognizes her love for Selina and her desire to rid herself of her old life, while simultaneously contemplating the loneliness this decision may invoke. She confides her feelings in snippets of conversation with her friend Helen, but holds back the full truth of her love, fearing rejection and misunderstanding.

The climax of the chapter arrives with the impending night of Selina’s escape, which is anchored to January 20th, St. Agnes' Eve—a night symbolizing love and longing. Margaret prepares meticulously, bringing forth symbols of her attachment to Selina, including a collar that Selina had worn. She is on edge, hopeful yet terrified that Selina will not come to her.

As the appointed night approaches, Margaret's anticipation and dread build. She isolates herself, transforming her room into a sanctum for their union while clutching her medicines—suggesting a blend of dependence and desperation as she seeks to summon Selina's spirit. The chapter closes on a note of ambiguity as dawn approaches and her connection to Selina remains unresolved, amplifying the emotional stakes and leaving readers in suspense regarding the future of their relationship.

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Themes of love, sacrifice, and the complexities of desire run deeply through this chapter, exploring how Margaret's world is beautifully and painfully redefined by her love for Selina, placing her at the mercy of her heart’s longing against societal constraints. The writing is rich and evocative, vividly capturing the intensity of Margaret's emotions as she navigates her secretive quest for love amidst the oppressive backdrop of Victorian society.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: The power of love to inspire bravery and sacrifice.

Critical Interpretation: As you read about Margaret's profound love for Selina, you're reminded that true love often requires us to confront our fears and make difficult choices. Margaret’s journey of planning Selina’s escape highlights that love can ignite a spark of courage within us, prompting us to break free from societal expectations and pursue what we value most. This chapter inspires you to reflect on your own relationships and the bravery it takes to support those you love, even in the face of uncertainty and sacrifice.

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Chapter 5 Summary: 5

In Chapter 5 of "Affinity" by Sarah Waters, we delve deeper into the turbulent emotional landscape of Margaret Prior. The chapter opens with a haunting reflection on Margaret's past attempt at suicide, where she drank morphine with the desire to join her deceased father in Heaven. She had been saved by her mother and a doctor, leaving her in a state of despair, feeling pulled back into a nightmare instead of a sanctuary. Margaret experiences a profound connection to Selina Dawes, a prisoner she has grown fond of, believing that Selina has somehow taken her essence since their last encounter.

Eager to reunite with Selina, Margaret decides to visit Millbank Prison, dressed in her visiting attire. On her way, a sinister voice echoes in her mind, urging her on and indicating that there's no other choice but to meet Selina. As she arrives at the prison, the atmosphere feels charged, and she notices an unsettling change in the warders' behavior towards her; there’s a growing tension that foreshadows trouble.

Upon entering the women's section, she learns from Miss Craven that Selina has mysteriously escaped from her cell without any alarms being raised. This shocking news triggers panic within Margaret, who realizes with dread that Selina could be lost out in the world without her. Instead of reveling in the freedom Selina has achieved, Margaret feels a desperate fear of losing

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her connection to her.

Margaret's quest for answers leads her to Selina’s cell, where she finds it empty, further deepening her distress. Conversations among the prison staff suggest that Selina’s escape may not have been achieved alone but with help, casting a shadow of complicity over the circumstances surrounding it. In her anguish, Margaret finds herself confronted by Miss Haxby and Mr. Shillitoe, who question whether she has any insight into Selina’s actions. They ponder if Selina had provided any hints about her escape or about someone who might have assisted her.

Amid the tumult, Miss Ridley—a matron who embodies the oppressive institution—taunts Margaret with implications of wrongdoing. This encounter heightens Margaret's sense of vulnerability as she grapples between loyalty to Selina and the oppressive scrutiny of the prison officials.

When Margaret eventually leaves Millbank, she is filled with paranoia and fear over what will become of Selina now that she is outside the prison walls. The chapter crescendos to a climax where Margaret returns to her home only to find that her maid, Ruth Vigers, has not only taken possessions but also her sense of security and connection to Selina. The feelings of betrayal engulf her when she discovers that Ruth has left a trail of deceit that may connect her to Selina's escape.

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As she navigates through her empty house, haunted by memories and a growing sense of loss, she becomes increasingly consumed by a vortex of despair and confusion. The ghosts of her past have not only resurfaced but intertwined with her present, leading her to question her feelings for Selina and the very essence of her identity.

A powerful theme that emerges in this chapter is the notion of entrapment—not only in the physical sense of the prison for Selina but also in Margaret's emotional and social confines. The chapter paints a complex emotional landscape, showcasing the depths of human relationships and the profound impact of longing, betrayal, and the search for personal connection amidst societal constraints. Margaret's journey becomes an exploration of desire and identity, leaving the reader with an intense sense of foreboding as she grapples with the loss of both Selina and herself.

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