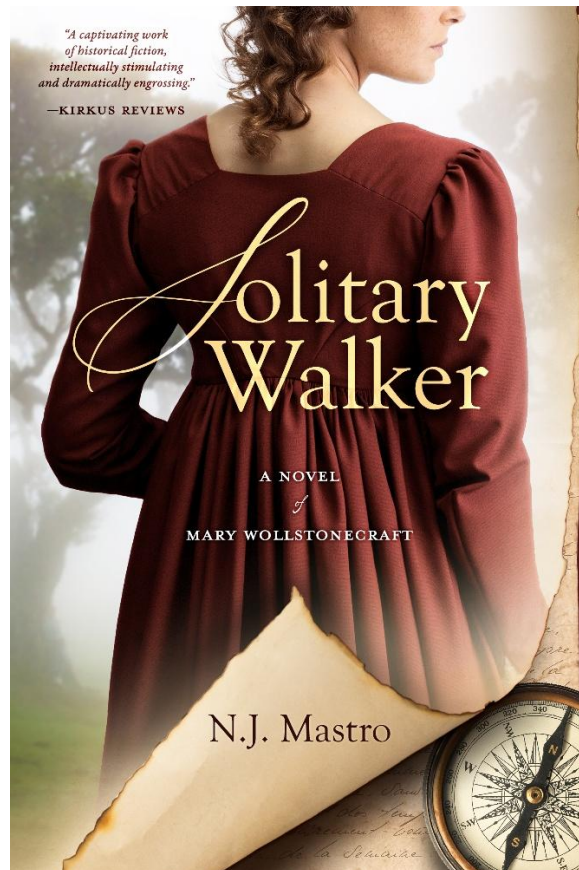


A Salon Kit



SOLITARY WALKER: A NOVEL OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

By N.J. Mastro



NJMASTRO.COM

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Solitary Walker: A Novel of Mary Wollstonecraft

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Dearest Reader,

Thank you for choosing [Solitary Walker: A Novel of Mary Wollstonecraft](#) as your book club pick. I admit here and now to falling completely under Mary Wollstonecraft's spell! When I began writing about her, little did I know how much she would consume my thoughts. A woman far ahead of her time, she only sought what modern women seek: to live life as a free thinker, to make decisions she saw as right for her and her children, and to earn a living on her own.

Imagine what it was like for her in a world where women were practically and legally subordinate to the men in their lives, husbands and fathers who, more often than not, saw the women in their life as inferior. Then along comes Mary Wollstonecraft, who says, "Hey, wait a minute. Not so fast." You go girl!

As modern women, we have to love Mary's spunk and her tenacity, even though, as brilliant as she was, Mary was also terribly naive when it came to love and intimacy. Uninitiated into the ways of Eros, she made choices that today might give us pause. We must not be too hard on her. While researching her, when I would get frustrated with Mary, I reminded myself that she lived in a very different world from now. In the end, she found her way, just as we all do. Still, I keep asking myself, then and now, why do smart women always fall for the bad boy? I guess it's because it helps us recognize the good guy when he finally comes along.

I've prepared this salon kit for book clubs because, if you're like me, you'll want to learn more about Mary Wollstonecraft, the woman whose writing would one day help launch campaigns toward suffrage and equal rights for women. A salon is the perfect medium to begin—or extend—your journey toward knowing more about her.

By the way, if you'd like me to pop in and say hello on Zoom (or some other online platform) and answer questions about Mary or what it was like writing about her, contact me at nancy@njmastro.com. I'd love to chat with your group. If you live near Aiken, SC, I'd be thrilled to visit in person.

Warm regards ~

N.J. Mastro



What is a salon?

A long time ago, salons brought people together to discuss scholarly topics, making them a crucial venue for learned women to exercise their intellect without chastisement. Society considered educated women unladylike. The Bluestocking Society changed that for a time and was part of Mary Wollstonecraft's England. Thinking women, or bluestockings, as they became known, were not a society per se, but were loosely organized gatherings of friends interested in exercising their intellects within their literary circle.

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The bluestocking era was short-lived. By the late 1790s, “bluestocking” had become a derogatory term for educated women. Men ridiculed their female counterparts. Said William Hazlitt, “The bluestocking is the most odious character in society ... she sinks where she is placed, like the yolk of an egg, to the bottom, and carries the filth with her.”¹ *Horrors!*

Today we have book clubs, which are like what the Bluestocking Society once represented, people gathering to talk about books. I’ve designed a salon kit for modern book clubs who love historical fiction and are interested in bringing a fun, thematic flair to their discussion of *Solitary Walker*. You can do the bare minimum, or you can go over the top, whatever your literary heart desires. The point is to have fun and maybe learn something new!



Setting the Stage for Your Salon

Salons started as early as the 16th century in France but became popular in England in the 1750s, the decade in which Mary Wollstonecraft was born. Mary tended to engage in intellectual discourse at dinner parties, such as those held by Joseph Johnson, but salons were important in England, and in France as well. In Paris, Mary would surely have attended one. Her close friend Helen Maria Williams was a well-known *salonnière*, or salon host. Mary might also have attended at least one or more salons hosted by Sophie Condorcet. There is no firm evidence that she actually met Condorcet, but it was just too tempting to imagine that she did, so I have a scene where Mary meets Sophie at a party at Helen’s.

In *Solitary Walker*, I also created an imagined salon at the rented home of Thomas Paine (see Chapter Ten), using the gathering as a prop for where Mary meets Gilbert Imlay. Mary actually met Imlay at the home of Thomas and Rebecca Christie. But I used literary license in arranging for Mary to meet Imlay at a salon hosted by Paine. This allowed me to feature Paine more prominently in the novel. I find him a fascinating figure, and the salon seemed like a necessary tie-in between Paine, Helen, Imlay, and Mary. Later in the story, Paine presents Mary with a thinly veiled warning about Imlay while escorting her to visit Helen in prison.

¹ Lowes, Richard. *Historic UK*. August 17, 2022. Retrieved online at <https://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/Blue-Stockings-Society/>

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To the host:

Before the meeting, encourage members to read the article [*Who were the Bluestockings*](#), which contains historical information and rich images about British salons. Another option would be to send out multiple articles about salons and encourage participants to read the article of their choice and ask them to come to the meeting prepared to share what they gleaned. (How Mary Wollstonecraft!)

Additional articles I recommend are:

- [*The Bluestockings Circle*](#)
- [*The \[French\] Salons*](#)
- [*Women in the French Revolution: From the Salons to the Streets*](#)

*Discussion About Salons**

1. How vital were salons for women during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries?
2. Would you have taken part in a salon during the Georgian era in England or in France during the French Revolution? Why or why not?
3. Is it important for women today to have an analogous way to gather and engage in intellectual discourse like salons offered?

**I don't mean to exclude men. Wherever I say "women," this should also mean the men and nonbinary individuals who attend your book club. It's just that in my experience, most book clubs are comprised of women.*

Bringing a European Theme to Your Salon

Hosts can make their gathering special by featuring food and refreshments representative of the three places Mary traveled to in *Solitary Walker*: England, France, and Scandinavia. I must note, Mary Wollstonecraft had an extremely sensitive stomach. She ate little and kept to simple foods like fruit and bread with a small portion of cheese.

But I'm a cook at heart, self-taught, and am always trying new recipes. Think of the emphasis on food here as an homage to Joseph Johnson's dinners. My love of food, wine, and cooking makes me partial to food and drink at book club, and those I've participated in always shared a meal, often one based on what the characters might have eaten. That said, I'm sensitive to the fact that not everyone likes to cook. So I've included easy things you can buy at the grocery store or online. I've prepared most of what I am recommending and can vouch for how simple each of these recipes is.

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Beverages

Tea is the obvious choice here if you want to keep all things English. Twinings, Harney's, or Duchess Grey are not hard to find, but the list is truly endless. People also drank coffee in all three countries (yes, including Great Britain), so coffee would also be wholly appropriate. Coffee was contraband in Sweden, so perhaps a Swedish coffee such as Gevalia would be a nod to Mary's rebellious spirit.

With the possible exception of Italy, no place in the world is more associated with wine than France. In *Solitary Walker*, Joseph Johnson serves canary wine to his dinner guests. For a discussion of *Solitary Walker*, however, French wine would be a superb choice in honor of the time Mary spent in France. Recommended wines:



- Red: Beaujolais (light), Cabernet Franc (medium), and Bordeaux (bold)
- White: White Bordeaux (light), Sauvignon Blanc (medium), and Chardonnay (bold)
- Sparkling: Champagne, of course!

What to Eat?

Referring back to Mary Wollstonecraft's limited palate, any gathering that features fruit along with cheese and bread would align to what Mary might have eaten. A British cheddar or a stilton would be delicious. A brie, roquefort, or camembert would be very nice as well. A *herrgardsost* would be a fine sample of Swedish cheese, though it would be hard to find. You could purchase a Jarlsberg or a Havarti cheese. Even if neither are historic cheeses, they're delicious and easy to find. Serve any of these cheeses with fresh bread from the grocery store and your literary friends will adore you.

But if you are a cook and want to kick things up, traditional British cuisine is simple but hearty. A shepherd's pie, or a cottage pie, made with beef instead of lamb, would be a safe bet, and you can assemble it ahead of time. Your guests' mouths will water as the smell wafts from your oven. [This recipe](#) allows you to make either kind of pie.

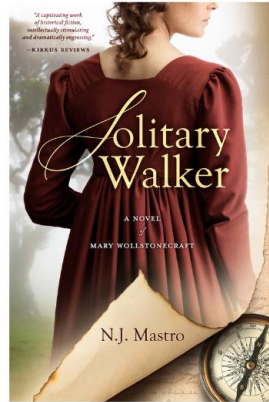
If you prefer a French dinner dish, the sky's the limit. For something light, a soup would be excellent, like this [potato-leek soup recipe from Debra Borchert](#), author of the delightful [Chateau de Verzat series](#), a series I highly recommend if you want to read more about the French Revolution. The Chateau de Verzat series features feisty, resilient women who live and work in a Loire Valley wine estate during the French Revolution. For the more adventurous cook, a [coq au Riesling](#) would be

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a showstopper, especially in cold months. When the weather's warm, try a [classic French bistro salad](#), which you can make in a snap.

food and wine pairings



If you meet in the morning or in the mid-afternoon and are partial to a Scandinavian theme, turn your gathering into a [fika](#). Fika (pronounced fee-ka) is the Swedish tradition of taking a break in one's day to enjoy a cup of coffee or tea and a little something to eat. You can enjoy any snack you like, but if you want to be very Swedish, here is a recipe for [cardamom buns](#), or [oat cookies](#), which are gluten free for guests with a gluten allergy. An open-faced cheese sandwich on rye bread would also be nummy. If your book club shares dinner, salmon is a Scandinavian staple, so a [Swedish salmon burger](#) would be more than fitting and is a breeze to make. For something heartier, you guessed it: [Swedish meatballs](#).

A word about bread... With any of these choices, bread is a must. I recommend a fresh-made or store-bought baguette. I make my own baguettes. They're a bit of work, but if you are a bread baker, please [try this recipe](#). I make these regularly, and everyone goes wild. (Just ask my neighbors.) The video shows you exactly what to do.

Dessert

For a dessert, and maybe this is all your book club wants or needs, if you're not a cook, a biscuit in England is simply a cookie. Try an English shortbread like Walker's. But if you do like to cook, a British bread and butter pudding, popular during Mary's time, would be scrumptious. Try [this recipe from Nigella Lawson](#), the British celebrity cook with a voice to die for.

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I'm turning to Ina Garten, my favorite American celebrity cook, who also has a house in Paris, for her [French cherry clafoutis](#). This would be easy to mix up and spectacular. But again, if cooking's not your jam (pun intended), chocolate truffles or macaroons would be a French treat anyone would enjoy, and you can purchase them just about anywhere, including online.

For a Scandinavian dessert, something with an almond flavor would be traditional. Consider [this recipe for mazariner](#), a Scandinavian almond tart. But if you want something you can buy, a ginger cookie would be all you need, such as [Anna's Ginger Thins](#), or any ginger cookie on your grocery store shelf. Ginger is a traditional Scandinavian spice.

Music

Music, anyone? Mary Wollstonecraft loved the music of George Friedrich Handel. In the novel, Mary attends a concert at Hanover Theater, where a Bach concerto sends her mood plummeting. (pages 87-88) Either of these classical artists as background music would be a superb theme builder. When I think of Mary in modern terms, the music of Alanis Morissette or Billie Eilish comes to mind, female vocalists who sing about life's heartaches and sorrows. [Click here](#) for a recording of Morissette's song "Magical Child," which reminds me of Mary. You can find the [lyrics here](#). Viewed through a contemporary lens, the song captures Mary's struggles and what she does to rescue herself.

Other Considerations: use this space to make a list of your own...

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Book Discussion

A Readers Guide is listed at the back of *Solitary Walker*, which I've restated here for your convenience, along with additional salon-like questions on the following page.

1. If Mary Wollstonecraft were alive today, how would modern women characterize her? Would it be different from how supporters and critics judged her in the eighteenth century?
2. What qualities did you like best in Mary and why? Which did you not like about her?
3. Would Mary have been successful were it not for Joseph Johnson investing in her as he did with money and emotional support? Have you ever had a mentor who provided you with substantial direction in your career or personal life? How did this impact you?
4. Compare Gilbert Imlay to William Godwin. How could Mary love two such different men? What attracted her to each? Have you ever loved men or women who are complete opposites?
5. Mary was not perfect. She possessed many faults and contradictions, making her human. Which fault(s), or contradiction(s) appealed to you most and why? Which left you feeling frustrated or disappointed in her?
6. Was Mary trying to kill herself when she took the laudanum? What about when she jumped off the bridge? Was she serious about ending her life?
7. Mary appears to be a smart woman who sometimes did foolish things. Do you agree? Have you ever done something foolish and later regretted it? Or did the experience, painful as it might have been, help you grow as a person?
8. How have things changed for women since Mary's lifetime? What things remain the same? Have women achieved the kind of liberty and equal opportunity for which Mary rallied during her short life?
9. Have you read anything about Mary Wollstonecraft before reading this novel? If so, in what way did *Solitary Walker* further illuminate her as either a feminist or as a historical figure? If you've not heard about her before, do you plan to find out more about her?
10. Do you believe Mary Wollstonecraft truly was the world's first feminist?

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Additional Questions for salon goers...

Four portraits exist of Mary Wollstonecraft. The three below are referenced in the novel and serve as a symbol of her arc as a writer and her maturation as a woman. Comparing them, what do they tell you about Mary as she grew into her own definition of womanhood? (For an even [earlier image of Mary](#), [click here](#), painted by art student John Keenan during her time in Ireland when she was a governess to the King girls, who are introduced in Chapter One.)



John Williamson, / [retrieved from Wikimedia Commons](#)

(Referenced on pages 71-76 in the paperback copy of *Solitary Walker*)



John Opie, 1790-91 / [retrieved from Wikimedia Commons](#)

(Referenced on page 85 of the paperback copy of *Solitary Walker*)



By John Opie, 1797 / [retrieved from Wikimedia Commons](#)

(Referenced on pages 279, 280, and 283-284 in the paperback copy of *Solitary Walker*)

Mary Wollstonecraft died giving birth to Mary Godwin, who ran away with a married Percy Bysshe Shelley when she was 16. They marry several years later, and Mary Shelley writes *Frankenstein, Or, the Modern Prometheus*, launching the entire new genre of science fiction. To what extent does history repeat itself from mother to daughter? (If you unfamiliar with Mary Shelley's story and her marriage to Percy Bysshe Shelley, for a quick read, [click here](#).)

In 2020, Mary was finally immortalized in a statue in London. When it was unveiled, however, it sparked an international firestorm. [You can view the statue and read about the debate in this article](#). Even if you don't read the article, view the image of the statue. What do you think of it? Do you think Mary Wollstonecraft would have approved? Why or why not?

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*“I do not wish them
[women] to have power
over men but over
themselves.”*

*-M. Wollstonecraft
A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

Thank you again for choosing *Solitary Walker* as your book club pick. I hope you enjoy reading and discussing it. I love visiting book clubs—and salons. If you'd like to invite me to your gathering, contact me at nancy@njmastro.com.

—N.J. Mastro



N.J. Mastro is the author of *Solitary Walker: A Novel of Mary Wollstonecraft* and *Herstory Revisted*, a blog which reviews biographical novels about women, because their stories are our stories.

A copy of this salon guide can be found at njmastro.com