

"Wild, exhilarating, and so fresh it takes your breath away."  
—LAUREN GROFF, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Matrix*  
"Awad is a stone-cold genius." —ANN BAUER, *The Washington Post*

all's  
well



mona  
awad

From the author of **Bunny**

reading  
group guide



**This reading group guide for *All's Well* includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion.**

**We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.**



# introduction

From the author of *Bunny*, which Margaret Atwood hails as “genius,” comes a dazzling and darkly funny novel about a theater professor who is convinced staging Shakespeare’s most maligned play will remedy all that ails her—but at what cost?

Miranda Fitch’s life is a waking nightmare. The accident that ended her burgeoning acting career left her with excruciating chronic back pain, a failed marriage, and a deepening dependence on painkillers. And now she’s on the verge of losing her job as a college theater director. Determined to put on Shakespeare’s *All’s Well That Ends Well*, the play that promised and cost her everything, she faces a mutinous cast hell-bent on staging *Macbeth* instead. Miranda sees her chance at redemption slip through her fingers.

That’s when she meets three strange benefactors who have an eerie knowledge of Miranda’s past and a tantalizing promise for her future: one where the show goes on, her rebellious students get what’s coming to them, and the invisible, doubted pain that’s kept her from the spotlight is made known.

With prose Margaret Atwood has described as “no punches pulled, no hilarities dodged . . . genius,” Mona Awad has concocted her most potent, subversive novel yet. *All’s Well* is the story of a woman at her breaking point and a formidable, piercingly funny indictment of our collective refusal to witness and believe female pain.



# topics & questions for discussion

**1** Miranda encounters three strange men at the Canny Man. After drinking the golden remedy drink, her chronic pain is temporarily relieved. Who or what do you think these three men represent?

**2** Miranda frequently references her performance as Helen in *All's Well That Ends Well*, her most successful role. In what ways does Helen's character shape her relationship with her students, coworkers, lovers, and herself?

**3** Miranda's chronic pain is regularly dismissed by her male physical therapists (and her friend Grace) as a matter of mind over body. What does this disparity in experience and treatment indicate about the way chronic pain conditions are viewed? How is the experience of pain management gendered in *All's Well*?

**4** Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* is commonly categorized as a "problem play," or both a comedy and tragedy. Would you describe this novel similarly? In what ways are they alike, and in what ways are they different?

**5** How does pain translate to performance throughout the novel?

**6** Have you ever studied or watched a performance of *All's Well That Ends Well*? What was your experience of the play? Discuss the themes which pair with *All's Well*.

**7** When Briana makes her abrupt return following her illness and discovers Ellie has taken over the role of Helen, she demands to play the role of the King. After noticing that Briana “attempts threat, confrontation, but she can only manage so much through the veil of pain” (p. 208), Miranda allows her to perform Act Two, Scene One of the play. How does this performance reflect the dynamics between Miranda and Briana?

**8** Have you ever participated in theater or performance arts? How did your experience compare to its portrayal in *All's Well*?

**9** Miranda’s perception of Briana and Ellie vary greatly. What do their representations reflect about how Miranda sees herself?

**10** In the beginning, Miranda’s theater students are seemingly unafraid of her. After the theater received its largest donation from the three men and Briana gets sick, the students, and even Grace, grow distant and fearful of her. How does this fear affect Miranda?

**11** The golden remedy drink at the Canny Man is eventually taken off the menu due to a limited supply (p. 351). What do you think its significance was throughout the novel?

Do you think this is the beginning of Miranda’s end?



# enhance your book club

**1** One of the three mysterious strangers at the Canny Man quotes Helen's lines 218–219 from Act One, Scene One of *All's Well That Ends Well* when first meeting Miranda. Look up this soliloquy from the play (you can find it online at <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/allswell>) and try performing for one another in your group. How does it feel? What is Helen saying in these lines? Why do you think these lines are so memorable to Miranda?

**2** How well do you know the Bard? Explore the Folger.edu website for information on Shakespeare's plays, study guides, and more. You can even stage a screening of the Folger Theater's production of *Macbeth*, which can be viewed on their site: <https://www.folger.edu/video-macbeth-folger-theatre>.

**3** Pour your own "Golden Remedy" cocktail:  
Ingredients: 2 ounces whiskey  
3/4 ounces ounce St-Germain (or 4 ounces ginger beer)  
2 dashes Angostura bitters  
Orange peel for garnish  
Instructions: Fill a highball glass (or mason jar if using ginger beer) with ice. Add the whiskey, St-Germain (or ginger beer), bitters and mix. Serve with orange peel garnish.

**4** Visit Mona Awad's website at <http://mona-awad-grou.squarespace.com> to learn more about her and her other works.



# a conversation with mona awad

**Q:** The portrayal of chronic pain is so clear and visceral on the page. Can you tell us about the autobiographical element of *All's Well*, especially as it relates to chronic pain?

**A:** A number of years ago, I hurt my hip and had to have surgery. It was a rough recovery and, because I'd been unstable on my legs for so long, I ended up injuring my back. I had disc herniations that caused all kinds of neurological symptoms down my legs, affecting my mobility. There was a point where I couldn't sit down at all, couldn't drive, couldn't close a window, could barely walk. I remember feeling very helpless and scared because a lot of the issues were neurological and chronic at that point, and so somewhat invisible, subject to debate, and difficult to treat. But the pain was absolutely real. I was going from one doctor to another, one therapist to another, most of whom were pretty dismissive and just threw pills at the problem. I was at my wit's end and I started dreaming not only of relief but of revenge. One of the most satisfying things I could imagine back then was a woman who could offload her pain onto people who

**Q:** Miranda becomes frustrated by needing to convince others of her pain and its validity; many patients, especially women, feel the need to “perform” pain to communicate it to others. It's interesting how this dovetails with the theatrical element in *All's Well*. How did pain and theater intersect in writing *All's Well*?

**A:** One of the things that's so hard about having chronic pain, having any kind of pain that's not visible, is communicating it to others not only for the purposes of relief, but to be understood, to feel less alone in it. In order to explain my pain not only to doctors

but to friends and colleagues, I would find myself performing it a little. And that act of performing inherently causes you to second-guess yourself, which is so scary: the pain is a reality that you're living but because of the performance element of sharing it, your reality immediately becomes suspect. That's why I chose a former actress and drama teacher to be the main character and to have the story set around theater production. I think there's an inherent relationship between performance, pain, and belief. And, of course, gender plays a role in credibility too. Because Miranda is a woman and because she performs for a living, she always feels like faking. In the novel, there's a scene where her bosses, the administrators of the college, are confronting her and they tell her to sit down in this office chair. She knows if she sits down, she'll be in so much agony but she can't imagine telling these three men, her superiors, that she wants to stand and then towering over them. She's also afraid that they'll think *there's the drama teacher up to her old tricks again*.

**Q: Many readers have commented on how much they love the clever overlap with Shakespeare. Can you speak more to what Shakespeare means to you personally and how his work inspired parts of the story?**

**A:** At the time that I was experiencing this debilitating pain, I was also a graduate student and I was teaching and reading Shakespeare and the plays really spoke to me. They have these wonderful, miraculous reversals of fortune that feel so exhilarating even when things go awry (which they often do). Also, Shakespeare is endlessly inspiring because there's so much room to play; there's so much openness complexity in his heroes. He's just brilliant at creating these very complicated monsters of human beings: people for whom we have sympathy, people who charm us, but who always challenge our sympathies with their flaws. *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Macbeth* were especially exciting to me because both characters—Helen and Macbeth—have a hidden desire that seems impossible to realize within the world of the play. They each have to take a kind of wildly transgressive action to make that dream come true. And it does come true—in one case very darkly, in another case very eerily happily. Like so many Shakespearean figures, they're both villainous and heroic. And that's Miranda—she is both the villain and hero of her own story.



**Q: Often authors are asked who would be the dream actor to personify their main character, but in this case Laura Dern is already attached to play Miranda! Are you excited to see what she brings to the character?**

**A:** Yes! Laura Dern is the master of capturing charged, heady states of emotion. She can go from the crazed depths of despair to maniacal elation and joy, which is important for this book. She's so brilliant at playing the villain and the hero, so I'm really thrilled, because that is the essence of Miranda.

**Q: *All's Well* isn't the first time you've used dark humor in your writing. Why do you think you gravitate to that as a tool?**

**A:** In my books, I've always been interested in humor as a way to move through darkness and alienation. A lot of the material in *All's Well* is drawn from some lived moments of real helplessness and pain where I was truly at a loss and didn't know if I would ever be well. But even in the midst of really dark moments, there's always a part of me that's laughing a little—either at the absurdity of the situation or the obvious human foibles and flaws that are making it awful, or I'm laughing at myself. I can't help it and I've always done it in times of darkness. First, because I think it helps to cope, but I think it's also a part of seeing the truth of that darkness as a whole. Comedy is part of the truth of tragedy—and tragedy is always part of the truth of comedy; they're different curves on a story line but they connect. That's what inspired me to bring comedy and tragedy together in this novel. Miranda is desperate to stage this comedy with this happy ending that she wishes were her life. But offstage, she has to live this tragedy over which she has no control. Each world says something profound about her relationship to the other.

**Q: Another feature of your books is exploring female dynamics, specifically (but not limited to) the ways in which women can be cruel to one another, and how friendships can endure mutual cruelty. Can you tell us a little about how this plays out in *All's Well*, and why you're drawn to writing complicated relationships? Will you talk about that and maybe give an example of one of the complicated relationships in the book?**

**A:** I'm very interested in how women internalize misogyny, the ways we're complicatedly cruel to each other, the ways we subtly or not-so-subtly draw power from each other's moments of failure and weakness. It makes me shiver like no other cruelty, because it can be so layered, subtextual, and hard to pinpoint and parse out. It's like chronic pain—it's there but it's tricky. In the book, there's a conflict between Miranda and her lead actress, Briana, a very privileged rich student whose parents are funding the theater program so Miranda pretty much has to be her servant, and Briana always gets to do whatever she wants onstage, even though she's not a good actress. They antagonize each other in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. It was very fun to explore those power dynamics. Briana's strength and power amplify Miranda's feelings of weakness and frailty, which begets its own cruelty and desire for retaliation. I'm also really interested in those moments of reversal when suddenly the power dynamic between women shifts. What happens when the weak suddenly rise and the powerful fall? This book explores how each position can be a dark, shaping force for the other.

Miranda also has a colleague and friend, Grace, who directs the play with her. Grace is this sturdy, no-nonsense New Englander who's never been sick a day in her life. And that makes Miranda feel weak, pathetic, and resentful, even though she loves Grace. And of course Grace, because she's only known health, doesn't quite believe Miranda's pain. She helps her but she's still withholding, judgmental, dismissive. They're small cruelties but they add up and they impact the friendship. I'm interested in how friendships can hold those small cruelties, those subtly toxic elements, and still ultimately be sustained

**Q:** *All's Well* also shines a light on the misogyny of the healthcare industry; what drew you to capture this on the page?

**A:** I think the biggest thing is just how hard it is to be taken seriously, to be looked in the eye by doctors. I remember my doctors always looking at and talking to my partner, never to me, and if I was alone, just looking away. That's an experience that Miranda frequently has in the book. Also, doctors quickly grabbing at "anxiety" as the reason why you might be in this shape. I felt pressure to make sure I wasn't displaying any

signs of stress so they had no reason to dismiss me or shut me up with a drug. I found there was a lot of pressure to be a good patient and to conform to some sort of progress narrative that my therapist or surgeon might have. And when your body fails to get better, they sort of want to blame you. So in *All's Well*, Miranda is very anxious to prove that she is a good patient to her physical therapists and her doctors. But because she's not improving, they dread her and don't really know what to do with her anymore and they just kind of randomly experiment with her during therapy appointments—let's do some tests, they say. It breeds a toxic relationship and a power dynamic that makes her really helpless, desperate, and ultimately worse off. There are some very sadistic surgeons and physical therapists in this book.

**Q: Maybe it's because of the Shakespearean angle, especially *Macbeth*, or the novel's interest in feminine power, but witchcraft feels present throughout the book. Can you speak a little a bit the role of witchcraft in the book?**

**A:** Part of what drew me to Shakespeare, and to these two plays, was the witchery. I'm fascinated by witches, especially as a woman living in New England, where the novel is set. In *All's Well*, there are some seriously powerful witches and the most sinister ones are actually men. *Macbeth's* three witches show up as three demonic businessmen and they are a force to be reckoned with. They represent this grander misogyny, this matrix of power that Miranda has to operate inside of, both in the medical world and at the college where she works. But I'm really interested in the ways women can claim agency within that matrix. Witchcraft and the occult have always fascinated me, particularly their framing of the feminine as a source of power. Witchcraft feels like a radical response, a way for women to tap into another kind of force and to subvert this matrix. One of the central characters, Ellie, Miranda's pet theater student and a teenage witch, even tries to heal Miranda with magic. So this book has a lot of fun with the circumventing powers of witchcraft and the occult as well as its damning connotations—there's even a witch trial of sorts. But ultimately it's the redemptive power of the feminine, its potential for empowerment and healing that this book celebrates.