

## A Reading Group Guide to

### ***The Degenerates***

by J. Albert Mann

#### **About the Book**

The Massachusetts School for the Feebleminded Youth was not a happy place. It was more of a prison than a school, and people diagnosed as morons, imbeciles, and idiots were locked away there for life. Set in the early twentieth century when the poor, the disabled, and the marginalized—including people of color and members of the LGBTQIA community—were rounded up and locked away, *The Degenerates* follows four young women determined to change their fates. Alice is brought to the school by her brother when he decides he can't support a sister with a clubfoot. Fourteen-year-old London is dragged there when she becomes pregnant. Sisters Maxine and Rose are deemed disposable in a family with many mouths to feed. This fiery novel delivers a shocking portrayal of the way society once dealt with people who did not conform to the perceived physical, social, and moral standards of the day.

#### **Discussion Questions**

1. How would you describe London's removal from her foster home? What does it tell you about the legal rights of children at the time? The policeman told London, "Not only are you a moron, but you are also a knocked-up little slut." Why was his use of the word *moron* dangerous for London, and why was her pregnancy considered an offense?
2. After a woman on the street noticed Alice's clubfoot and her sister-in-law's pregnant belly, she urged the expectant mother to, "Pray to the Lord this next one don't come out tainted." What assumption was this woman making? What did she mean by "tainted"? Why do you think she felt free to make such a comment?
3. At the school, a nurse tested London's intelligence and concluded she was "a high-grade moron." In what way was this test biased? Why was this problematic? Do you think there was any chance that London or any other girls could have passed? Explain your answers.
4. Discuss the meaning of the words *moron*, *imbecile*, *idiot*, and *degenerate* as they were understood in the early twentieth century as compared to today. How has or hasn't the use of these words changed?
5. Life inside the school was an endless routine of whistles for waking up, group toilet time, walking in circles, clapping to stand and dress and undress, and bedtime at 5:30. Define the word *monotony* and how people, in general, react to it. What

everyday freedoms do you enjoy that the characters in the book do not? Imagine having these freedoms restricted or taken from you. How would your life change as a result?

6. Rose asked why the walking paths went in circles and was told, “My dear, the feeble-minded body is lacking a vital force. The paths circle to remove decision or choice.” Why is freedom of choice vital for human beings? What choices do you make every day? How do you think your life would change if you were not allowed to make personal choices? How does this wear on the girls inside the school?

7. London felt like she had been “punched in the stomach” when she learned she had been committed to the institution for life: “You have been deemed unfit. This isn’t prison. There is no parole. You just live here now.” How does that statement make you feel? Why was London’s first thought for her unborn child? What does *hereditary* mean, and what were the implications for her child?

8. Maxine struggled with the sadness and confusion she felt about being exiled from her home. The superintendent of the school assured her she had committed no crime; instead, she praised Maxine’s mother for recognizing Maxine’s feeble-mindedness at an early age, saying, “Because, my dear, every moron, especially the higher-grade moron, such as yourself, is a potential criminal.” What do you think Maxine felt at that moment? Have you ever been unfairly judged or underestimated, or watched someone else be treated that way? How did it make you feel? How did you handle the situation?

9. Rose kept a stick hidden near her bed, which she curled up with at night “like it was some sort of baby doll.” Why might Rose develop a relationship with an inanimate object? Why do you think she chose a stick?

10. What did Alice mean when she said she “could feel herself slipping, unlearning things she’d once known. Stitching hems and washing bedsheets didn’t help you learn.” How is exposure to new thoughts, ideas, and information vital to human growth and development? Give an example from your own life to support your answer.

11. When Maxine confessed to stealing money to protect her sister, she was wrestled to the ground and strapped in a straitjacket. She cried out, “I hate you! I hate you! I hate you all!” Why was such an expression of raw emotion dangerous? What does it reveal about the hierarchy within the school? Consider Alice’s explanation that begins with “They were allowed to feel—the attendants, the nurses, the doctors,” and relate it to her “walnut” coping mechanism.

12. After escaping a second time, London was recaptured when she broke the window at the Flannery family butcher shop. Alby Flannery was the father of her baby, and we learned his father had turned London in to remove the threat of the “knocked-up dago bitch.” Discuss Alby’s character. Why wasn’t he labeled a degenerate and locked

away? How have attitudes changed or not changed regarding men, women, and pregnancy?

13. Badly beaten, London was returned to the school where she suffered a miscarriage. An attendant promised to “lay the little thing to rest . . . It will be buried as proper as I can do it.” Another nurse proclaimed the miscarriage was for the best: “God knows, we don’t need another generation of mental defectives.” Discuss these statements in the context of what society believed about the value of human life. What might a more sensitive healthcare provider have said to London? How might this experience and the way it was handled affect London’s future?

14. London was forced to listen in silence as the head nurse admonished her: “Be thankful you’re here in Massachusetts. Almost any other state would have you sterilized, as well you should be. Motherhood is a privilege, my dear, not a right.” How does this statement make you feel? What was meant by sterilization? How did society justify this position at that time? What kind of arguments can you make against this justification?

15. In the Back Ward where London was forced to hose down other women and “scoop shit into a bucket,” an attendant called the women “animals.” In response, London “turned and sprayed the attendant directly in the face for two solid minutes.” How would you describe London’s action and motivation? How did the scene relate to the one in the autopsy room where London said incurables “don’t need to be prevented”?

16. A doctor proclaimed that the babies in the crib room were “insensitive to hunger, cold, and pain.” By way of demonstration, he “reached in Miriam’s crib and pinched her. Hard.” London had to stop herself from “leaping at him and ripping out his throat.” How did the doctor’s attitude align with the eugenics movement of the day? Discuss the meaning of the word *dehumanization*, and relate it this scene.

17. “Alice,” London snapped. “It’s time to stop wondering if this piece of shit place has you pegged right. You won’t make it out of here if you believe these pricks.” What does it mean to have someone pegged? How can being pegged make life difficult? Why is what you believe about yourself more important than what others believe? Explain your answers.

18. During London’s struggle to save the babies, Rose, and herself from the fire, Rose and her beloved stick played an important part in their rescue. Discuss how this scene demonstrates that every person has something to contribute.

### Extension Activities

**Are You Worthy?** One of the book’s historical notes says, “The early twentieth century saw the emergence of a powerful union between science and social policy called Eugenics—the pseudo-science of human improvement or human breeding.”

Using *The Degenerates* and internet sources, ask students to compile a list of human traits that eugenics considered unworthy. Discuss the stereotypes and prejudices that arose from this, and why it was problematic. Research the way society accommodates and celebrates people with differences today. For example, businesses are now required to provide equal access for the handicapped.

**The Presumed Guilty Make Fine Punching Bags.** London is punched, kicked, and tossed around by the police despite being pregnant and only fourteen years old. Search for news accounts of contemporary incidents of police brutality against teenagers. Write an essay about how a particular incident was similar to or different from London's treatment. What has changed or stayed the same with the police, society, and/or our judicial system? What might account for the changes or similarities?

**The Next Chapter?** At the conclusion of *The Degenerates*, London is still at the institution. Divide your class into two groups and ask them to brainstorm about the next chapter of her life. Based on their knowledge of her character, what do they think happens to her? Ask each group to develop a detailed theory, supported by their own insights into her character, and present it for classroom discussion.

**A Ball and a Stick.** Human needs do not change, even under difficult circumstances. Ask your students to watch or read about the movie *Cast Away*, paying close attention to the volleyball character, Wilson. Lead a classroom discussion about the psychology behind the relationship that Tom Hanks's character develops with Wilson, and compare it to Rose and her stick.

**Dear Rebel.** The author dedicates *The Degenerates* "To every girl who has ever been told to *take it down a notch*." Instruct students to write a letter to London explaining how they feel about her treatment before and during her confinement, and encouraging her to keep standing up for herself.

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