



# Reading Group Guide

## **TONIC and BALM**

by Stephanie Allen  
Shade Mountain Press  
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Please visit [stephanieallen.net](http://stephanieallen.net) for a synopsis of the book, historical background about medicine shows and interviews with the author.

### General Questions for Discussion

1. *Tonic and Balm* is labeled a "novel." Is it one? What makes that label suitable or not for the book?
2. Who is the main character? Is there one? Are there two? Three? Many? How does the way you answer this question influence your experience in reading?
3. What would you call the relationship between Ephraim and Antoinette in the first chapter, "Come on Up"? Is it a friendship? Something else? Does it matter what name you give it?
4. Why are the cast and crew working in a medicine show rather than in "normal" jobs? What personal, social, cultural and economic factors helped to lead them to where they are?
5. Doc Bell's show seems to operate on the outskirts of society, and its outsider status seems to be part of its appeal to its members. To what degree does it actually allow its members to escape from society? To what extent is that escape an illusion?
6. What do you think happened to Haines, the guitarist who disappears early in the novel? Why? What effect does it have when you don't find out definitively what became of him?
7. Some of the cast and crew express racist (or sexist, or ableist) views, reflecting common attitudes among people of the time. Do these characters deserve your attention? Why or why not?
8. How does illness shape the way Antoinette is able to lead her life? How do Antoinette and others navigate the obstacles illness presents to them? How much has changed in the ways we perceive illness or experience illness since the time of the novel?

9. Patent medicines, which were very popular in the nineteenth century, fell under increasing scrutiny in the early 20th century. A 1905 expose in *Colliers Magazine* helped to increase skepticism of them and spur the passage of federal laws requiring accurate labeling of patent medicine ingredients and disclosure of their effects. Has our modern system of manufacturing and selling medicines done away with the problems of patent medicines? How does our system seem better or worse than what Doc Bell was doing?

10. The book's epilogue addresses what happens to characters after the conclusion of the central events. Do their fates seem fitting? Or did you see other ends for them? Did you want to know more about what became of any characters?

### Questions for Those with an Interest in the Performing Arts

1. How does Doc Bell's medicine show seem to differ from a carnival or circus? Would the novel be different if it were about the members of one of those more familiar kinds of traveling shows? How?

2. The members of Doc Bell's show have little to no formal training in music, theater, etc. Where and how do these performers seem to have learned their skills? Would you regard them as "artists" in their fields?

3. How has live performance changed over time? How have modern technologies like electronic amplification and recording altered the way performance is delivered? How have these technologies changed the way performance is consumed? Do you think these changes have been for the better?

4. A medicine show, by its nature, highlights the commercial pressures of performance, the need to turn a profit vs. the desire to create music, dance, etc., out of other motivations. How does that conflict manifest itself in the novel? How does that conflict influence the arts today?

5. The novel can be seen as a "behind the scenes" look at the private lives of people who make their living as public performers. Would they want their private lives aired before an audience? Should the public scrutinize the private lives of performers?