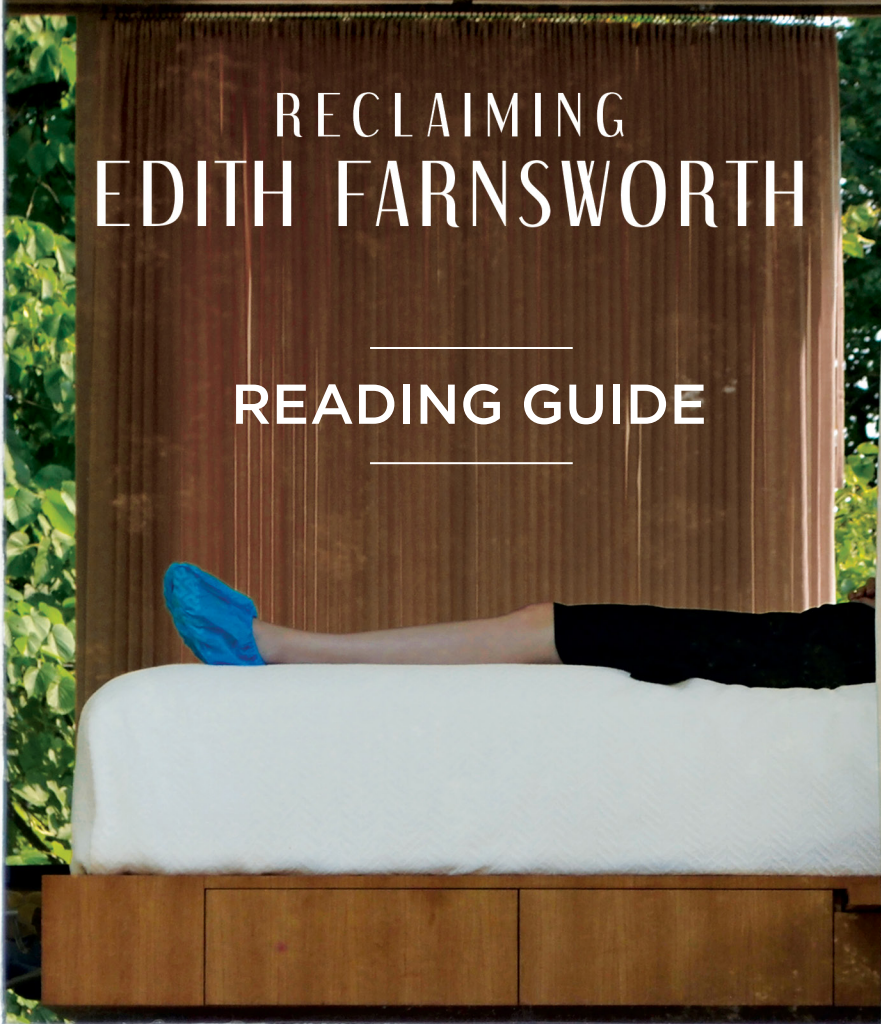


ALMOST NOTHING

RECLAIMING
EDITH FARNSWORTH

READING GUIDE



NORA WENDL

BOOK CLUB CONVERSATION QUESTIONS

1. This book opens with an epigraph by Anne Carson: “To live past the end of your myth is a perilous thing.” Why do you think the author chose this statement? How does it apply to the book?
2. In *Almost Nothing*, architecture professor Nora Wendl is trying to transform the way we understand the history of a well-known architectural feat—a history that has rarely been questioned. What does this book suggest or reveal about how architectural histories are written, and about the effort it takes to change them?
3. The book’s title, *Almost Nothing*, is the English translation of the German phrase that Mies van der Rohe used to describe to Edith Farnsworth his plan for her house. It would be *beinahe nichts*, he told her, almost nothing—though, as the author reveals, building the house was a massive effort and expense. How do you interpret this title’s various possible meanings in the book?
4. The voice of this book is at once intimate, confessional, humorous, and researched. What did you think about the use of this voice to narrate this history, when history is typically written from the perspective of an omniscient, disembodied, and “neutral” narrator?
5. In this book, glass is both a material and a metaphor. In what ways do you see the metaphor show up in the story? How do you see it in the way Nora tries to research and tell Edith Farnsworth’s story?

6. The book seems to suggest that women like Edith are perceived as unimportant historical figures. How does that perception shape how histories are recorded and told?
7. The author reveals that Elizabeth Gordon, editor of *House Beautiful*, warned audiences that the openness and visibility of the Edith Farnsworth House was a “threat to democracy,” a statement that has undertones of McCarthyism and xenophobia. Today, the house is quite familiar and accepted. How do politics impact how architecture, art, and literature are viewed? What role does media play in shaping our tastes and what we deem acceptable?
8. The author writes that researching Edith Farnsworth meant “falling in love” with her subject. She writes, “If there is a proper way to write this history, I don’t want to know.” She tries in many different ways to become close to her, mainly through proximity to her papers and archive, through inhabiting the Farnsworth House and attempting a séance, and moving to Chicago to live in the city in which her subject lived. Through these unconventional research methods, the author embraces autofiction to reveal the process of rewriting this history. Did you enjoy the author making this process so visible in her writing? How did it change your understanding of how history is written?
9. The author writes about the Indigenous histories of New Mexico, where she lives, and Illinois, where Edith Farnsworth’s glass house is, acknowledging the evidence of long histories of human occupation in both places before the arrival of Spanish and European colonizers. What Indigenous communities are present where you live? What do you know about or want to learn from them?
10. When the author goes through a university investigation, she juxtaposes her experience with the experience that Edith Farnsworth had when she was sued by the architect and countersued him. What similarities exist in these two scenarios that occurred half a century apart? What differences?
11. Nearly a century separates Edith Farnsworth and the author. What has changed for American women? What has not?

12. The author uses Edith Farnsworth's poetry as a source to piece together her biography, though poems can be elusive as a historical source; they are full of allusions, metaphors, and descriptions of things that may or may not *literally* exist in the world. What do you think of the author's use of Farnsworth's poetry to write about and make sense of her life?
13. The author encounters instances of "archival silence" when she learns that key pages of Edith Farnsworth's memoirs are missing, or when Farnsworth pretends to lack awareness about Gertrude Stein's sexuality. Why do you suspect that Farnsworth's archive may have been censored, or why would Farnsworth self-censor? How common do you think this may have been in mid-20th century America?
14. In this book, the author refers to "our history," a shared history between herself and her subject; she compares and contrasts her own life and the lives of her women relatives with Edith Farnsworth's, though time and class separate them all. What do you believe the author means by the phrase "our history"? Do women have shared histories and, if so, what are they?
15. The author acknowledges that Edith Farnsworth's unpublished memoirs move both backward and forward in time. The author mirrors this in the organization of this book, weaving between the present and the past, and between Edith Farnsworth's experiences and her own. What was this experience like for you, as a reader? How did it make you think about time?

