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Reader's Guide

for Rosellen Brown's
The Lake on Fire

Discussion Questions

1. What does Ms. Gottlieb mean by "principles cost money"? Do you agree? Are principles a privilege? If this is true does it invalidate principles? Does it excuse unprincipled acts? Who in the book compromises their principles and who refuses to? What effects do these compromises or non-compromises have on the people around them?
2. What role does naming play in the book? How are names tied to identity? Who gets the privilege of naming and renaming? How is the act of naming a reflection of power?
3. How is softness portrayed in the novel? What contradictions does it reveal? How is its association with class privilege contradicted by its association with the unprivileged gender status of femininity? How does the "hardness" of the out-of-work men Asher befriends contrast with the "softness" of Gregory? How does it contrast with the "softness" of Chaya? How are the ways these workmen contrast with Gregory different than the ways they contrast with Chaya?
4. What ways does the book show the effects of capitalism on the body of workers? How are the bodies of men and women treated differently? How are bodies treated differently on the farm versus than in the factory?
5. Chaya makes multiple attempts to return to places and people she has left. Is she successful? What would a successful return look like for her?
6. What opportunities does Chicago provide that rural Wisconsin doesn't, and vice versa? What challenges are unique to the city and to the farm respectively? What opportunities are available in America that weren't in Russia? Is part of the Shaderowsky's identity lost or changed in America? What difficulties does immigration present?
7. How does loss shape Chaya and Asher's experience?
8. How does Jewishness affect Chaya and Asher's view of the world? How does it affect how the world views them? How is Yiddish used throughout the book and what effect does it have?
9. What is the significance of the World's Fair in the novel? How is it used as a setting to explore progress, inequality, and the relationship between the two?

10. What is the role of literature for the characters, and what does the book envision as the role of literature in society? How does the book question the value of literature in times of inequality and social unrest, and how does the book affirm the value of literature? How does Brown make the reader complicit in the act of literature?
11. How are fairy tales used to explore the themes of the novel? How are they subverted?

Writing Exercise:

Out of Time

So much in *The Lake of Fire* is about the timing of encounters, events, and politics. Under what circumstances would a virtuous character commit a violent crime of their own volition? Who would know about this crime? Who would be kept in the dark? Write a character sketch of these three people. Then find a time in history where their motives would fit.

Further Reading:

1. *The Devil in the White City* by Erik Larson
2. *A People's History of Chicago* by Kevin Corral
3. *The Dean's December* by Saul Bellow
4. *Prairie Avenue* by Arthur Meeker
5. *The Song of the Lark* by Willa Cather
6. *The Cliff Dwellers* by Henry Blake Fuller

