

Lillian On Life

Alison Jean Lester

Discussion Questions

1. Lillian lives in a time of great change. In what ways is she both a traditional woman and a modern one? How does she defy society's expectations of her? How does she conform to them? In what ways would today's society perceive her differently now from how society would have perceived her in the 1960s and 1970s?
2. In the beginning of the novel, Lillian wonders whether "beauty has a dual purpose", like wives and K-Y Jelly. What do you feel this dual purpose is? Does that purpose change over the course of the story? Over time? What role—good and bad—does Lillian's beauty play in her life?
3. Lillian lives in various European cities—Munich, Paris, London—before New York, where she lives as she tells her story. What significance does each place have in the context of the book? Is traveling important for growing up and/or being independent? Is Lillian an independent person?
4. Even though Laszlo raped Lillian, why does she agree to meet him when he shows up in London? Does the rape affect her views on sex and men? How does it relate to the out-of-body experience she has with John?
5. When Lillian thinks about her decision to live in Germany for six weeks, she remarks, "The parental presence is eternal". How is this reflected in the way this story is told?
6. What impact does Lillian's relationship with her father have on her future relationships with men?
7. When she is in bed after the robbery, Lillian craves the same feeling that Ted gave her—of someone else knowing "exactly who you are". What does this say about her choice to be his mistress for twelve years? Why does Ted end up being the love of Lillian's life? Does she make the right decision? Could she have worked out a lifetime relationship with any of the men in the book?
8. Lillian doesn't mention many close female friends. Why do you think that is?
9. How does Lillian's relationship with her mother shape her into the person she is? Does Lillian resemble her mother in any way? How did you react to Lillian's decision to get an abortion? How might motherhood have changed Lillian?
10. A female narrator over the age of fifty is uncommon. How did Lillian's age influence your reading experience? What does the underrepresentation of female heroines older than fifty say about society's views on women?
11. The last line of the novel states: "Actions are whispers compared to dreams." Do you agree? Why does Lillian choose to close her narrative with these words? What do you think is the book's central lesson? What is your favorite piece of Lillian "wisdom"?