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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Garlic and Sapphires by Ruth Reichl

Summary

Ruth Reichl, world-renowned food critic and former editor in chief of *Gourmet* magazine, knows a thing or two about food. She also knows that as the most important food critic in the country, you need to be anonymous when reviewing some of the most high-profile establishments in the biggest restaurant town in the world—a charge she took very seriously, taking on the guise of a series of eccentric personalities. In *Garlic and Sapphires*, Reichl reveals the comic absurdity, artifice, and excellence to be found in the sumptuously appointed stages of the epicurean world and gives us—along with some of her favorite recipes and reviews—her remarkable reflections on how one’s outer appearance can influence one’s inner character, expectations, and appetites, not to mention the quality of service one receives.

Discussion Questions

1. “Every restaurant is a theater,” Reichl explains. “Each one offers the opportunity to become someone else, at least for a little while. Restaurants free us from mundane reality.” How do restaurants allow a person to leave reality?
2. Reichl creates wildly innovative disguises. Which disguise is your favorite?
3. Why is it so important for Reichl to maintain anonymity in her work?
4. What insights did Reichl offer about the inner workings of the nation’s most powerful newspaper *The New York Times*?
5. Reichl states to her future employers, “Your reviews are very useful guides for the people who already eat in the restaurants you review...You shouldn't be writing reviews for the people who dine in fancy restaurants but for those who wish they could.” How does this attitude change her role as a reviewer as well as how restaurants are reviewed?
6. By using disguises, Ruth is able to slip into the world of the “ordinary” diner. She can see what each restaurant will serve to the patrons who seem to be nobodies. Why is important that she has this type of experience in a restaurant? Do you feel this allows her to write an objective review?

7. Lisa Check said, “Her husband brings to mind the poem ‘Four Quartets’ by T.S. Eliot - “Garlic and Sapphires in the mud” as a way to describe the transition of Ruth. Why is the poem and title of the poem important? How does this become the title of her book?
8. “To say that the only thing that matters is what's on the plate is to miss the major role restaurants have in our lives today,” said Reichl. How does she portray that eating in a restaurant is more than just a physical experience?
9. Reichl in an interview with Psychology Today explains the importance of food. She said, “It’s a way that we tell the world who we are, a way of setting boundaries. You can see it in young children. Food is a place where they say, ‘This is mine. I will not eat this.’ You know, it’s virtually impossible to force someone to eat unless you stick a tube down the throat. So it’s really an area where children can have their own way. Everybody tells about their parents warning, ‘You can't leave the table until you've eaten this or that.’ And the child will sit there, all day long and say, ‘You can’t make me.’ What they mean is ‘I can tell you who I am through this.’ How does food define us and our lives?
10. A book reviewer says, “Ruth Reichl manages to make not only writing about food, but writing about writing about food both entertaining and gastronomically bearable.” Did you feel the format of her memoir was engaging?
11. During her job interview, Reichl openly criticizes the paper’s high-brow approach to restaurant ratings, telling the editors that most people reading the reviews will never be able to eat at Le Cirque or Daniel (at least not on a regular basis) but want to be able to imagine that they can. How do her reviews allow people to do this?
12. How does Reichl touch upon topics of gender, class and generational issues in the world of fine food in her book?
13. Each disguise takes on a personality. What does Ruth learn about herself and others through each disguise?
14. How does Reichl touch upon the political and social importance of food?
15. Her husband, at one point when she gets caught up in the glamour of her job, reminds her why food is really important. “You love to eat, you love to write, and you love the generosity of cooks and what happens around the table when a great meal is served.” How do the three components blend in this memoir?

Summary from the Publisher. Discussion Questions from Manitowoc (WI) Public Library