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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Summer at Tiffany by Marjorie Hart

Summary

In the summer of 1945 Marjorie Hart and a sorority sister at the University of Iowa set out, like Dorothy and Toto, for New York City, determined to find work as salesgirls. Turned down by Lord & Taylor, they talked their way into jobs as the first female pages at Tiffany & Co. Now in her 80s, Hart describes that experience in *Summer at Tiffany*, an affectionate memoir of Manhattan just before and after V-J Day.

Discussion Questions

1. Marjorie Hart seems to feel only gratitude that she and her friend Marty had the opportunity to work Tiffany's in the summer of 1945. "We had to be the luckiest girls in town to be part of the Tiffany family and watch the curtain open to the toniest display of jewelry in the world." [Page 34] Based on what she tells you about herself in her book, what do you think accounts for her sunnyside-up view of life? Do you think it has to do with her generation, her small-town Midwestern background or something else?
2. Many bestselling memoirs and biographies are what Joyce Carol Oates has called "pathography," or books that focus on the pathological. Why do you think Hart was able to get *Summer at Tiffany* published when it's so different from memoirs like Augusten Burroughs's *Running With Scissors*? What makes her story enjoyable?
3. The end of World War II received more coverage than any previous event and continues to inspire books, movies, and TV shows. It also resulted in one of the most famous photographs of the century, Alfred Eisenstaedt's picture of a sailor and nurse in Times Square on V-J Day. What did *Summer at Tiffany* tell you about that event (and the days just before and after it) that you hadn't learned from other media?
4. Hart tells us up front that she has taken liberties with her story. She writes: "In some cases composite characters have been created or timelines have been compressed in order to further preserve the privacy of dear friends and maintain the narrative flow." [Page vi] Could you see evidence of this in her story? Where?
5. Using composites characters or scenes in nonfiction is controversial. Some journalists say you should never use these. Others say it's okay if a) you tell readers up front that you have done so and b) it's



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necessary to tell a worthy story. After reading *Summer at Tiffany*, what do you think? Did the book justify any liberties that Hart took?

6. In our era we continually hear that it's "healthy" to express your feelings, even if they might upset others. Hart grew up with different values: "It's important not to disappoint anyone, or make them worry." [Page 248] Does she seem to have suffered from this? Why or why not?

7. Do you think your parents and grandparents have the same view of this book that you would? Why or why not?

8. Some of Hart's experiences have an underside she doesn't deal with. For example, all of the women in the photo of Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority are white. Should Hart have explored these issues? Or would that have made it a different book?

9. Late in the book, Hart has to decide whether to accept a scholarship to Yale that, she says, arose suddenly. Does she give you enough information to understand why she made the choice she did? What factors seemed most important to her decision? Would you have made the same choice?

10. Hart offers vibrant glimpses of her small-town and of Manhattan in the 1940s. For example, after the *Queen Mary* brought thousands of soldiers back from Europe, the Red Cross gave out 35,000 half-pint cartons of milk because the servicemen and -women seldom had milk overseas. [Page 80] What details do you remember best? Why did they make an impression on you?

11. The caption for the last photo in the book tells us that after visiting Tiffany's in the winter of 1945, Hart didn't return until 2004. Apparently it wasn't because she couldn't afford the trip. Does it seem remarkable that she didn't go back sooner? What might explain her delayed return? Have you ever avoided going back to a place where you were happy? Why?