

Southfield Public Library

Life Is Short But Wide by J. California Cooper

Discussion Questions used at SPL -- February 2011

1. What were the strengths of this novel? What were the weaknesses?
2. Did you get a sense of time and place in the story? Or could it have been anywhere, anytime?
3. What did you think of your narrator? Have you ever met someone like that in your life? Someone who knows things about everyone in the community? Are there such people anymore?
4. At the beginning of the story, where Hattie talked about the “broken” one who had the fullest life and the prettiest one, who had the emptiest. . . Were you able to see who she was talking about?
5. Hattie was quite the philosopher. . . standing in for the author, I think. Would you agree with her on her definition of “good luck = opportunity met with action”?
6. What did you think of the story of Val and Irene? Was their story a true love story? Did it make sense that Irene never told of her illness? Do you think that was typical of their time? Is it still today? What was their relationship like? Who ran the show? Or was it a true partnership? Is such a thing possible?
7. Did you like Bertha and Joseph? How would you describe their life together?
8. Were there barriers between the two couples? Who put them there?
9. What did you think of Val and Irene’s two daughters, Tante and Rose? What were there similarities? Their differences? Their strengths? Their weaknesses? Could you compare them to their parents? As kids, if you could pick one for a friend, which one would it be? What about as adults? How did Tante’s leaving affect Rose?
10. What did you learn of Bertha’s daughter, Juliet?
11. Could the families have survived without each other? What were some of the difficulties they had to face?

12. The rape of Rose was an obviously traumatic event for her. How did it shape her life? How did it influence her decision to marry Leroy? What was the best thing that came out of their marriage?
13. What sort of businesswoman was Rose as a landlord?
14. What did you think of Herman's story? Do you think such a young boy could have survived on his own? Why, as a man, was he fooled by so many women?
15. Who had the strongest relationship – Juliet/Cloud, Joseph/Bertha, Val/Irene?
16. What was the worst event that happened in the story for you?
17. Why didn't anyone tell Rose about Leroy's other woman? Would you be brave/strong enough to tell someone news like that?
18. Why didn't Bertha step in when she thought Rose was dying because of Tonya? And why didn't they fight for Myine?
19. What did you think of Tante when she swooped in to help with that whole mess?
20. Did Tonya get what she deserved?
21. Why did Herman's "children" go down such a bad road? Myine was in worse straits and she managed to keep herself in line. . .
22. What possessed Myine to take in Lola? Was she, as in Tante's opinion, "weak, like Rose"? How would you describe her?
23. What did you think of the advice that Tante gave Myine? (p 208)
24. Why oh why did it take so long for Herman and Myine to find each other?
25. Which characters did you like the best? Sympathized the most with? Disliked the most?
26. Would you agree with Hattie's statement (p 269) that in "her experience, you just have to let life and love work its own self out?"
27. What do you think the title means? (p 316)
28. What were some of the messages the author was trying to get through her story?

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General Discussion Questions

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
 - How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
 - How would you describe the author's writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
 - How effective is the author's use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
 - Did the book hold your interest?
 - How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
 - Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
 - Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?
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Discussion Questions from LitLovers.com

<http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-fiction/555-life-is-short-but-wide-cooper?start=3>

1. Talk about the hardships encountered by the two couples: Val and Irene, and Bertha and Joseph.
2. How do the the two sisters, Tante and Rose, differ? Which sister do you most admire?
3. Why does Cooper choose 91-year-old Hattie to narrate the story? What does she bring to the narrative?
4. How does Herman Tenderman's return complicate the events of the story?
5. Which characters in this multi-generational saga do you sympathize with most...and least?
6. What is the significance of the novel's title?
7. Ultimately, what lessons in life do characters learn? What are the messages that Cooper works to convey in her novel?