

Southfield Public Library

The Boston Girl by Anita Diamant

Discussion questions used at SPL May 10 & 11, 2016

1. What are your thoughts about children trying to escape their parents' tradition? Do all kids strive to be different from their parents? Is it a rite of passage to forge your own path in life?
2. What effect do the historical facts included in the story have on you as a reader? Do they add to the story? In what ways? Do you gain any insights to the main character Addie?
3. Would you consider Addie a journalist? Why didn't she get her degree and pursue a career in writing? Opportunities were limited for women and minorities, have things changed much today.
4. We read a lot about Mameh, Addie's mother. Why do you think she was so unhappy? Do you think she ever adjusted to living in the USA?
5. What is being "a Boston girl"? Does the author give a real sense of what being a Boston girl is and means to Addie? Addie defines the real Boston girl as "modern, educated and connected". Is it a state of mind, a birthright based on geographic location, or a socioeconomic/class distinction? How would you describe a Boston girl?
6. Addie talks about several historical things that affected her life and the lives of others: Lynching in the South, Child Labor Laws, Voting Rights for Women, Women in the workplace, Race/Religion Relations, Veterans w/PTSD, The Depression, Illegal Abortions, Orphan Trains, expectations of women at that time, etc. Is there one that resonated with you? If so, which one and why? Have things changed today than from years ago?
7. What words of wisdom was Addie sharing with her granddaughter and the readers as she was telling her story? For example--Page 244..."You should always be kind to people...you never know what sorrows they're carrying around." Page 288..."...it's good to be smart, but kindness is more important."
8. Do you think Mameh really did not love Addie? Why was she so cruel and judgmental towards her? Are mothers supposed to love their children? What things in Addie do you think caused her mother to dislike?
9. Were you engaged with the story, location, and characters? Were they authentic and realistic? This is a work of fiction but did you find the characters believable?
10. All Addie wanted was for her mother to tell her "she was all right". Do you think we all crave that from our parents (even cruel and abusive ones)?
11. Betty was more of a mother to Addie than Mameh, was this typical of first born girls in families to take on the duties and responsibilities of their mothers even when the mother is living?
12. What impact do you think the male characters had on Addie? Her father, brother-in-law, editor/boss, first love, the veteran (Ernie), and Aaron, her husband.

13. Addie was very fortunate to have found a circle of friends and teachers who encouraged her to be the woman that she became. Do you recall individuals in your life that encouraged you to be the best that you could be when you did not see it yourself? Sisters, Teachers, counselors, boss, friends, husband, etc.
14. Does this book read like “an authentic American woman” coming of age story?
15. Addie and Filomena share a long and lasting friendship throughout their lives. Can you explain why they stayed connected as they did even after Filomena moved to New Mexico? What characteristics do you think friends should have to maintain that sort of connectedness?
16. The author states in an interview that “Addie’s career finds her”. What are your thoughts about women and careers and your own career? Can you relate to Addie as she meanders through her life without a plan to be a journalist, writer, social worker, and teacher? Are you a planner? Have you always known what you wanted in a career or life? Would her life goals have differed if she lived in another region of the country? Had been of another religion affiliation? Had been born male?
17. Do you think this is an immigrant’s tale not just a Jewish immigrant’s tale? Does that sense of “otherness” exist today among immigrants? Would any first generation immigrant have the same feelings as Addie?
18. What issues from the book that happen in the 1920s would you say still exist today? Example: the shame of miscarriages; social injustices; expectations of women (career or motherhood).
19. How important is mentorship to Addie and all of us? Can you name a mentor?
20. The Schlesinger Library Newsletter stated that “women breaking out of bounds is one of the charms of *The Boston Girl*. Addie and her pals are coming of age during the early part of the 20th century, a time when women were entering the workforce, going to college, and finding their voices. Addie and her friends face more obstacles at work and home than women do today, but the challenges are similar: finding work and love, remaining true to friends and family while forging your own path.” Do you agree or disagree?
21. Rockport Lodge existed for over 90 years providing a place for girls and young women to go and explore infinite possibilities for their future at a time when expectations were confined to marriage and children not careers as artists, journalist, lawyers, actors, politicians and etc. One goal of the lodge organizers was to “Americanize” girls from immigrant families in the beginning. Do you think immigrants should be “Americanize”? What problems did this create at home for those first generation children? What about today and cultural awareness and appreciation, should immigrants still be “Americanized”? Is there still a need for a Rockford Lodge today? If you had to define or design “Americanizing” immigrants what things would you include?

(Questions taken from Lit Lovers & issued by the publisher)

1. Early on it is clear that Addie has a rebellious streak, joining the library group and running away to Rockport Lodge. Is Addie right to disobey her parents? Where does she get her courage?
2. Addie's mother refuses to see Celia's death as anything but an accident, and Addie comments that "whenever I heard my mother's version of what happened, I felt sick to my stomach" (page 94). Did Celia commit suicide? How might the guilt that Addie feels differ from the guilt her mother feels?
3. When Addie tries on pants for the first time, she feels emotionally as well as physically liberated, and confesses that she would like to go to college (page 108). How does the social significance of clothing and hairstyle differ for Addie, Gussie, and Filomena in the book?
4. Diamant fills her narrative with a number of historical events and figures, from the psychological effects of World War I and the pandemic outbreak of influenza in 1918 to child labor laws to the cultural impact of Betty Friedan. How do real-life people and events affect how we read Addie's fictional story?
5. Gussie is one of the most forward-thinking characters in the novel; however, despite her law degree she has trouble finding a job as an attorney because "no one would hire a lady lawyer" (page 145). What other limitations do Addie and her friends face in the work force? What limitations do women and/or minorities face today?
6. After distancing herself from Ernie when he suffers a nervous episode brought on by combat stress, Addie sees a community of war veterans come forward to assist him (page 155). What does the remorse that Addie later feels suggest about the challenges American soldiers face as they reintegrate into society? Do you think soldiers today face similar challenges?
7. Addie notices that the Rockport locals seem related to one another, and the cook Mrs. Morse confides in her sister that, although she is usually suspicious of immigrant boarders, "some of them are nicer than Americans" (page 167). How does tolerance of the immigrant population vary between city and town in the novel? For whom might Mrs. Morse reserve the term "Americans"?
8. Addie is initially drawn to Tessa Thorndike because she is a Boston Brahmin who isn't afraid to poke fun at her own class on the women's page of the newspaper. What strengths and weaknesses does Tessa's character represent for educated women of the time? How does Addie's description of Tessa bring her reliability into question?
9. Addie's parents frequently admonish her for being ungrateful, but Addie feels she has earned her freedom to move into a boarding house when her parents move to Roxbury, in part because she contributed to the family income (page 185). How does the Baum family move to Roxbury show the ways Betty and Addie think differently than their parents about household roles? Why does their father take such offense at Harold Levine's offer to house the family?

10. The last meaningful conversation between Addie and her mother turns out to be an apology her mother meant for Celia, and for a moment during her mother's funeral Addie thinks, "She won't be able to make me feel like there's something wrong with me anymore" (page 276). Does Addie find any closure from her mother's death?

11. Filomena draws a distinction between love and marriage when she spends time catching up with Addie before her wedding, but Addie disagrees with the assertion that "you only get one great love in a lifetime" (page 289). In what ways do the different romantic experiences of each woman inform the ideas each has about love?

12. Filomena and Addie share a deep friendship. Addie tells Ada that "sometimes friends grow apart...But sometimes, it doesn't matter how far apart you live or how little you talk—it's still there" (page 283). What qualities do you think friends must share in order to have that kind of connection? Discuss your relationship with a best friend.

Southfield Public Library

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?

Southfield Public Library

Anita Diamant on *The Boston Girl*

Video summary ~2:16 minutes

website address: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CJpN_LxjcLE

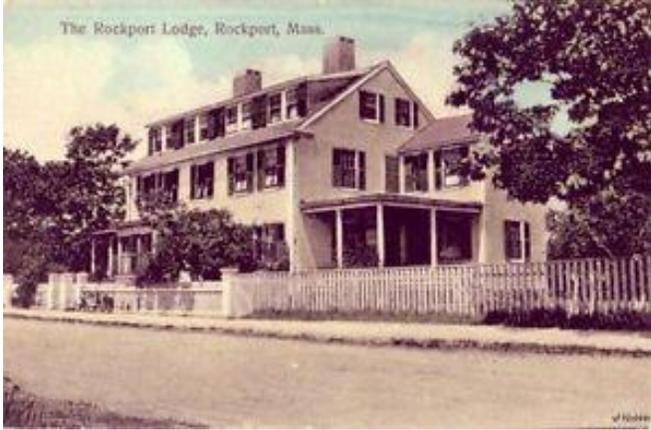
Interview with the Author:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jWOaI5_pD8U

Rockport Lodge is a real place: <http://oasis.lib.harvard.edu/oasis/deliver/~sch01257>

HISTORY

A vacation house for working women of low and moderate income, Rockport Lodge began in 1906 with the purchase of a house and property by the Massachusetts Association of Women Workers. The Lodge opened the following year, offering a week's vacation to twenty club members for four dollars each, and soon expanded, with an annex added in the 1920s, and additional improvements in subsequent years. The Lodge provided a variety of activities for its guests, including tennis, hiking, stunt nights, workshops (ranging from quilt-making and painting to money management), and concerts. After earlier affiliations with the Massachusetts League of Women Workers, and the Massachusetts League of Girls' Clubs, the Lodge became affiliated with the Women's Educational and Industrial Union (Boston, Massachusetts) in 1946. In 1976, believing that the Lodge was no longer performing a necessary function, the Union attempted to close it; this resulted in considerable protest by lodgers, legal action, and, ultimately, the establishment of a new advisory committee overseeing the Lodge. Further legal action resulted following the committee's attempt to close the Lodge for the summer of 1989. After several years of financial difficulties, the Lodge closed in 2002, and the following year the property was donated to Wellspring House, a local non-profit organization serving the needs of women with limited resources. Wellspring intended to build low-income housing on the site, but found this project economically infeasible, and in 2007 put the property on the market.



The Rockport Lodge, Rockport, Mass



The Barn at Rockport Lodge Massachusetts



1943-PC-Rockport Lodge Rockport Massachusetts



Rockport Lodge, Summer 1913. Courtesy of the Rockport Lodge Records, Schlesinger Library