

Southfield Public Library

The Paris Wife by Paula McLain

Discussion questions used at SPL March 13 & 14, 2018

Discussion Questions issued by the Publisher:

1. In many ways, Hadley's girlhood in St. Louis was a difficult and repressive experience. How do her early years prepare her to meet and fall in love with Ernest? What does life with Ernest offer her that she hasn't encountered before? What are the risks?
2. Hadley and Ernest don't get a lot of encouragement from their friends and family when they decided to marry. What seems to draw the two together? What are some of the strengths of their initial attraction and partnership? The challenges?
3. The Ernest Hemingway we meet in *The Paris Wife*—through Hadley's eyes—is in many ways different from the ways we imagine him when faced with the largeness of his later persona. What do you see as his character strengths? Can you see what Hadley saw in him?
4. The Hemingways spontaneously opt for Paris over Rome when they get key advice from Sherwood Anderson. What was life like for them when they first arrived? How did Hadley's initial feelings about Paris differ from Ernest's and why?
5. Throughout *The Paris Wife*, Hadley refers to herself as "Victorian" as opposed to "modern." What are some of the ways she doesn't feel like she fits into life in bohemian Paris? How does this impact her relationship with Ernest? Her self-esteem? What are some of the ways Hadley's "old-fashioned" quality can be seen as a strength and not a weakness?
6. Hadley and Ernest's marriage survived for many years in Jazz-Age Paris, an environment that had very little patience for monogamy and other traditional values. What in their relationship seems to sustain them? How does their marriage differ from those around them? Pound's and Shakespeare's? Scott and Zelda's?
7. Most of *The Paris Wife* is written in Hadley's voice, but a few select passages come to us from Ernest's point of view. What impact does getting Ernest's perspective have on our understanding of their marriage? How does it affect your ability to understand him and his motivations in general?
8. What was the role of literary spouses in 1920's Paris? How is Hadley challenged and restricted by her gender? Would those restrictions have changed if she had been an artist and not merely a "wife"?

9. At one point, Ezra Pound warns Hadley that it would be a dire mistake to let parenthood change Ernest. Is there a nugget of truth behind his concern? What are some of the ways Ernest is changed by Bumby's birth? What about Hadley? What does motherhood bring to her life, for better or worse?

10. One of the most wrenching scenes in the book is when Hadley loses a valise containing all of Ernest's work to date. What kind of turning point does this mark for the Hemingway's marriage? Do you think Ernest ever forgives her?

11. When the couple moves to Toronto to have Bumby, Ernest tries his best to stick it out with a regular "nine-to-five" reporter's job, and yet he ultimately finds this impossible. Why is life in Toronto so difficult for Ernest? Why does Hadley agree to go back to Paris earlier than they planned, even though she doesn't know how they'll make it financially? How does she benefit from supporting his decision to make a go at writing only fiction?

12. Hadley and Ernest had similar upbringings in many ways. What are the parallels, and how do these affect the choices Hadley makes as a wife and mother?

13. In *The Paris Wife*, when Ernest receives his contract for *In Our Time*, Hadley says, "He would never again be unknown. We would never again be this happy." How did fame affect Ernest and his relationship with Hadley?

14. *The Sun Also Rises* is drawn from the Hemingways' real-life experiences with bullfighting in Spain. Ernest and his friends are clearly present in the book, but Hadley is not. Why? In what ways do you think Hadley is instrumental to the book regardless, and to Ernest's career in general?

15. How does the time and place—Paris in the 20's—affect Ernest and Hadley's marriage? What impact does the war, for instance, have on the choices and behavior of the expatriate artists surrounding the Hemingways? Do you see Ernest changing in response to the world around him? How, and how does Hadley feel about those changes?

16. What was the nature of the relationship between Hadley and Pauline Pfeiffer? Were they legitimately friends? How do you see Pauline taking advantage of her intimate position in the Hemingway's life? Do you think Hadley is naive for not suspecting Pauline of having designs on Ernest earlier? Why or why not?

17. It seems as if Ernest tries to make his marriage work even after Pauline arrives on the scene. What would it have cost Hadley to stick it out with Ernest no matter what? Is there a way she could have fought harder for her marriage?

18. In many ways, Hadley is a very different person at the end of the novel than the girl who encounters Ernest by chance at a party. How do you understand her trajectory and

transformation? Are there any ways she essentially doesn't change?

19. When Hemingway's biographer Carlos Baker interviewed Hadley Richardson near the end of her life, he expected her to be bitter, and yet she persisted in describing Ernest as a "prince." How can she have continued to love and admire him after the way he hurt her?

20. Ernest Hemingway spent the last months of his life tenderly reliving his first marriage in the pages his memoir, *A Moveable Feast*. In fact, it was the last thing he wrote before his death. Do you think he realized what he'd truly lost with Hadley?

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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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Title:

Discussion questions taken from a website:

website address:

Hadley's mother died of Bright's Disease:

<https://www.britannica.com/science/Bright-disease>

More written on the wives of Ernst Hemingway:

Mrs. Hemingway by Naomi Wood

The Hemingway Women: Those Who Love Him - The Wives and Others by Bernice Kert

How It Was by Mary Welsh Hemingway

A Life Worth Living: Adventures of a Passionate Sportsman by Jack Hemingway (Bumby)

Misadventures of a Fly Fisherman: My Life With and Without Papa by Jack Hemingway

Gertrude Stein:



Gertrude Stein with [Ernest Hemingway](#)'s son, [Jack Hemingway](#) in 1924. Stein is credited with bringing the term "Lost Generation" into use. Wikipedia.com



Ernest Hemingway and first wife Hadley and friends | © John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Boston/WikiCommons



Gerald and Sara Murphy, Ernest Hemingway, and friends in Spain | © Unattributed/WikiCommons





F. Scott Fitzgerald and wife Zelda

