



The Scenic Route

By Binnie Kirshenbaum
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Reading Group Guide for The Scenic Route by Binnie Kirshenbaum ISBN: 9780060784744

Introduction

Divorced, alone, and unexpectedly unemployed, Sylvia Landsman flees to Italy, where she meets Henry, a wistful, married, middle-aged expatriate. Taking off on a grand tour of Europe bankrolled with his wife's money, Henry and Sylvia follow a circuitous route around the continent—as Sylvia entertains Henry with stories of her peculiar family and her damaged friends, of dead ducks and Alma Mahler. Her narrative is a tapestry of remembrances and regrets . . . and her secret shame: a small, cowardly sin of omission. Yet when the opportunity arises for Sylvia and Henry to do something small but brave, the refrain of "if only" returns to haunt her, leaving Sylvia with one more story of love lived and lost.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why would Sylvia think that it's better to do something foolish than to do nothing at all? What is it about the sin of omission, about passivity, that strikes her as so unforgivable?
2. What is the purpose or the reason for the stories within stories, especially the stories such as the ones about Rasinets and Shalimar? How are they connected to Sylvia's story?
3. How does telling stories about ourselves and our friends and family keep memory alive? Do you think it is true that, as Sylvia says, we exist only in the confines of stories?
4. It's easy to think ill of Henry for living off his wife's money, but would it be possible for him to live without it? Is he immoral or simply weak? Is he any different from Sylvia's Aunt Thea and Uncle John?
5. Neurologists have recently discovered a mechanism for eradicating traumatic memories. Sylvia's father and her great-aunt both suffered extreme memory loss and in some significant ways were happier for it. Might it be beneficial to forget those things that caused us pain?
6. Why didn't Sylvia ever talk to Ruby about her mental illness? Why didn't she suggest that Ruby see a psychiatrist?
7. In so many respects, Sylvia had an ideal childhood, yet she was not a very happy child. Why was that?
8. What do you think really happened to Henry's sister?
9. The novel opens with an excerpt of the poem *An Ode to Things*. What significance do things, material things, hold for these characters?
10. Is it a mid-life crisis, a reckoning of her own mortality, that prompts Sylvia to fear that her future holds only memories and regrets? Does being middle-aged change expectations or hopes for the future?

About the Author

Binnie Kirshenbaum is the author of *An Almost Perfect Moment*, *On Mermaid Avenue*, *A Disturbance in One Place*, *Pure Poetry*, and *Hester Among the Ruins*, and *History on a Personal Note*. She is a professor at Columbia University's School of the Arts, where she is chair of the Graduate Writing Program.