



## The Red Leather Diary

By Lily Koppel  
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### Introduction

Rescued from a Dumpster on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, a discarded diary brings to life the glamorous, forgotten world of an extraordinary young woman.

For more than half a century, *The Red Leather Diary* lay silent, languishing inside a steamer trunk, its worn cover crumbling into little flakes. When a cleaning sweep of a New York City apartment building brings this lost treasure to light, both the diary and its owner are given a second life.

Recovered by Lily Koppel, a young writer working at the New York Times, the journal paints a vivid picture of 1930s New York—horseback riding in Central Park, summer excursions to the Catskills, and an obsession with a famous avant-garde actress. From 1929 to 1934, not a single day's entry is

skipped.

Opening the tarnished brass lock, Koppel embarks on a journey into the past, traveling to a New York in which women of privilege meet for tea at Schrafft's, dance at the Hotel Pennsylvania, and toast the night at El Morocco. As she turns the diary's brittle pages, Koppel is captivated by the headstrong young woman whose intimate thoughts and emotions fill the pale blue lines. Who was this lovely ingénue who adored the works of Baudelaire and Jane Austen, who was sexually curious beyond her years, who traveled to Rome, Paris, and London?

Compelled by the hopes and heartaches captured in the pages, Koppel sets out to find the diary's owner, her only clue the inscription on the frontispiece—"This book belongs to . . . Florence Wolfson." A chance phone call from a private investigator leads Koppel to Florence, a ninety-year-old woman living with her husband of sixty-seven years. Reunited with her diary, Florence ventures back to the girl she once was, rediscovering a lost self that burned with artistic fervor.

Joining intimate interviews with original diary entries, Koppel reveals the world of a New York teenager obsessed with the state of her soul and her appearance, and muses on the serendipitous chain of events that returned the lost journal to its owner. Evocative and entrancing, *The Red Leather Diary* re-creates the romance and glitter, sophistication and promise, of 1930s New York, bringing to life the true story of a precocious young woman who dared to follow her dreams.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Koppel writes that "she wasn't really interested in celebrities" that she was covering for the New York Times before she found the diary. She writes, "wanted everything to slow down. I was searching for a story that completely touched my life and those of other people." What point does the book make about finding meaning in our youth-obsessed, celebrity-crazed, materialistic culture? Do teenagers keep diaries anymore? Where do we record our inner lives? What windows do we have into the human soul?
2. One morning, outside of her Manhattan apartment, Koppel glimpses an unusual sight: a dumpster piled with old steamer trunks. Late for work, she climbs in, prying open the trunks' rusty latches. Among the flapper dresses, old photographs, "an entire collection of handbags," a tangerine bouclé coat from Bergdorf's, she discovers a crumpling red leather diary kept by a precocious and free-spirited young woman named Florence Wolfson. Koppel writes, "I couldn't help but read it as if it were a personal letter to me." Koppel unearthed a deep and profound connection with a like-minded spirit. Does the discovery of the diary signal fate? A cosmic force at work? Coincidence?
3. Opening the tarnished brass lock, Koppel embarks on a journey into the past. As she turns the diary's brittle pages, she is captivated by the headstrong young woman whose intimate thoughts and emotions fill the pale blue lines. "I had kept journals but never like this. Not a single day was skipped in the diary's full five years from 1929 to 1934," Koppel writes. Is Florence's inner monologue recorded on the pages of her diary a "real-life time machine," as Koppel writes, or also a portal for us to look at ourselves, daughters, mothers and grandmothers in a new light?
4. Koppel writes, "Florence's writing possessed the literary equivalent of perfect pitch." In one entry, Florence swooned, "Have stuffed myself with Mozart and Beethoven—I feel like a ripe apricot—I'm dizzy with the exotic." At fifteen, she writes, "Went to the Museum of Modern Art and almost passed out from sheer jealousy—I can't even paint an apple yet—it's heartbreaking!" Florence records, "I'm not ordinary." In another entry: "There's so much to do—music, art, books, people—can one absorb it all?" How does Florence compare with contemporary young women today?
5. Even for someone who has never been to New York, the city is a character in the book as the place of endless possibility. "It was alive with writers, painters, playwrights, and jazz," Koppel writes, in comparison to her New York which "seemed out of tune, on its way to becoming a strip mall filled with Paris Hilton look-alikes." In an entry, Florence writes, "Wrote all day—and my story is still incomplete." In what ways does Koppel pick up the young Florence's story where she left off 75 years ago?
6. Florence was crazy about art, but she was also mad about love. Her father was a physician and her mother owned a couture dress shop, who provided her comforts and gave her access to Manhattan's vibrant cultural scene. Florence writes, "Five hours of tennis and glorious happiness—all I want is someone to love—I feel incomplete." Were you surprised at the degree of freedom Florence was given as

a young woman?

7. Gender roles come up repeatedly in *The Red Leather Diary*, be it Florence's mother's unusual role as a business owner who kept her family afloat during the Depression, Florence's admiration for the actress Eva Le Gallienne, Florence's romantic attachments to young men and women, and her disdain for the marriage her parents expected her to embark on as soon as she graduated. How relevant is Florence's gender? How did it shape her life? How might her life have been different if she were a young woman today?

8. As serendipitously as Koppel finds the diary, an eccentric private investigator who wears a trench coat and carries a magnifying glass enters her life and helps track down ninety-year-old Florence Howitt living with her husband of 67 years in Pompano Beach, Florida. Koppel writes, "A diary is about change." How does meeting the older Florence complete the diary?

9. When Florence hosted her salon, she and her members were pursuing the Socratic quest, to "know thyself." Three quarters of a century later, does Florence find the answer or is it her ongoing journey? What does this say about her youthfulness of spirit?

10. A lot of emotional power derives from the drama of an old woman reclaiming a past that was almost lost to her. As Florence writes in the book's foreword: "How do you feel when a forgotten chunk of your life, full of adolescent angst and passion, is handed to you? How do you feel when you see your striving, feeling, immature self through your now elderly eyes? It stopped my heart for a moment. That was *me*?" "You've brought back my life," Florence said to Koppel. How would *you* feel?

11. At 24, Florence married Nat Howitt, one of the eight beautiful brothers built like Greek gods she met at 13 at Spring Lake who became a successful oral surgeon. She and Nat were married 67 years, until he died. Florence sailed to Europe in 1936, had a love affair with an Italian count who was a poet and a pilot. Why do you think she married Nat? How does her decision comment on her parents' emotional distance from their children? Beneath her outward confidence, does it seem Florence had a longing for security and normalcy?

12. After she married, Florence went on to write edgy feminist-tinged articles for women's magazines during the 1940s, titles such as "What Does One Do with the Unmarried Daughter?" "How to Behave in Public Without an Escort," "How to Quarrel with Your Husband." She wrote an unpublished book called *Are Husbands Necessary?* By the 1950s, the heyday of the feminine mystique, Florence's creative fervor gave way to rounds of tennis, bridge and cocktail parties. Once burning with artistic ambition, Florence spent most of her life in the conventional roles of wife, mother and grandmother. Do you see an art in these roles?

13. At 90, Florence writes, she was living "what can only be called a bland life." Florence struck her own balance between autonomy and security, sexual freedom and familial obligations, a literary career and a traditional lifestyle. In her conflicts and compromises, her triumphs and sacrifices, is she part of history? Who is Florence Wolfson Howitt? Who are some other Florences?

14. "Once upon a time the diary had a tiny key," Koppel begins and ends the book. In what way is the non-fiction book a fairy tale? Who is the heroine? Is there one main character or three: Koppel, the young Florence, and ninety-year-old Florence?

15. Florence asks the searching questions about paths not taken: "Where did all of that creativity go?...If I was true to myself, would I have ended up living this ordinary life?" Do you think perceived faults can be transformed into strengths rather than merely being repressed? How does Koppel gaze behind the surface of "ordinary" lives to disclose private truths?

### **About the Author**

Lily Koppel writes for *The New York Times* and other publications. She lives in New York City.