



The Fountain of St. James Court; or, Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman

By Sena Jeter Naslund
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Questions for Discussion

1. The fountain of St. James Court not only provides part of the novel's title, but is featured throughout the book. What is its significance? What does it symbolize to Kathryn and the other residents of St. James Court?
2. Naslund alternates chapters between Kathryn's own story and her novel about Élisabeth. How does this narrative practice affect your reading experience? What benefits does this technique provide? Identify and discuss the parallels between the two stories.
3. After her most recent divorce, Kathryn decides, "What she wanted was to dwell in her own skin, peaceful and joyful. That was her ambition for her life" (pg. 51). Was she able to accomplish this? If so, in what ways?
4. In *Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman*, Élisabeth's father plays an important role in her development as an artist. Describe their relationship. How did he encourage the development of her painting talents? As she grew from teenager to young woman to parent, how did their relationship and the memory of it continue to influence her?
5. Beauty is a continuous theme throughout both *Fountain and Portrait*. What role does beauty play in each story? Identify some examples of the role beauty plays in Kathryn's life and in Élisabeth's. What do you think beauty means to each of the women?
6. Naslund uses the perspectives of many characters to tell Kathryn's story, some ongoing, some only once or twice. In what ways do the multiple perspectives benefit or hinder the story's development?
7. Compare and contrast the lives and personalities of Kathryn and Élisabeth. Though one is a writer and one is a painter, what similarities do you note between their artistic processes? Do they come to their vocations as artists in a similar way?
8. On page 168, Élisabeth learns that her friend and fellow painter Mlle Bouquet gives up her art after marriage. While this discourages Élisabeth from marrying, she eventually chooses to marry M. Le Brun who recognizes her artistic talents. How does Élisabeth's marriage benefit her and her art? In what ways does M. Le Brun's encouragement and support of Élisabeth's painting also turn out to be a form of manipulation and control? How does Élisabeth choose to cope with the discovery that her husband is less desirable than she once believed?
9. Kathryn and Leslie's friendship lasts for decades. Describe their relationship over the years. How has it changed and evolved? How do their conversations benefit each of the women? How does Leslie influence Kathryn's writing and vice versa?
10. Race plays a role in Kathryn and Leslie's relationship, particularly the initiation of their friendship as "study buddies" while in college (pg. 174). On page 294, Kathryn finds herself feeling guilty, as though she's being racist, when Leslie "does for her." She then questions if the anxiety about being racist is even *more* racist. What do you think about this observation? How else does race play a part in their relationship? How does Leslie seem to feel about the racial differences between them?
11. What role does sexism or gender-based social conventions play in Leslie's and Ryn's life choices (pg. 69)? (Naslund's title refers to a novel written about a hundred years ago by James Joyce: *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.) How important is the theme of aging to both Élisabeth and Kathryn?
12. When Kathryn tells Leslie about the woman who jumped off the roof of Kathryn's house, Kathryn wonders: "what is it that holds a person together" when they are presented with difficult situations? Leslie responds: "Love and beauty" (pg. 295). Do you believe this is true? What do you think holds a person together during difficult times? Use examples from the novel to support your opinion.
13. How does Élisabeth's experience of marriage (her own, as well as her mother's) influence her reaction to Julie's desire to marry M. Nigris (pg. 348)? How does her reaction affect her relationship with Julie?
14. All parents make mistakes in their parenting. Élisabeth believes if she had been a capable mother her daughter would be alive and happy. Do you agree or disagree? Were Élisabeth's perceived mistakes to blame for Julie's unhappiness? How did Élisabeth's attempts to protect Julie compare to Kathryn's attempts to protect Humphrey? Do you think either of them was successful in the end? Why or why not?
15. Naslund's novel has two titles: *The Fountain of St. James Court; or, Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman*. The second title, *Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman*, is also the title of the main character's novel. On pg. 4, we read that "the book had promised its author to be a looking glass--albeit streaked, clouded, and freckled by imagination--in which the author might glimpse revelatory images of herself." What might Kathryn, or anyone, have learned from the life of Elisabeth Vigee-Le Brun? From Kathryn's own life?

16. Naslund's novel is about the lives of two creative women, their joys and challenges. The novel is also about the interrelatedness of life and art. Art is drawn from life, or inspired by life, or is a reaction against some aspect of reality. Life is often enriched through the experiencing of art--not just literature but also music and the visual arts. What have been meaningful encounters with art, broadly speaking, in your life?