

Readers Group Guide

The Bridge Ladies, by Betsy Lerner

Discussion Questions

1. Consider the Bridge Ladies: Roz, Bette, Bea, Jackie, and Rhoda. How are they similar? How are they different? What traits do you think Betsy has in common with these women?
2. Rhoda calls herself a Victorian. Are her old-fashioned ideals outmoded or would we better off with more rules of civility?
3. Bette's dreams of becoming an actress were crushed in college when she no longer got leading parts in the plays; how does this disappointment play out during her lifetime? How does disappointment shape or define a life?
4. Jackie was a great beauty but her mother never acknowledged it, afraid her daughter might become vain. What message did your mother send you about your looks? What message do you send to your daughter?
5. Bea is the one Midwesterner in the Bridge Club and says she still feels like an outsider after living in New Haven for more than sixty years. How does community impact these women? What does it mean to "belong," either to a place or a group of people?
6. Roz wanted to be a writer as a young woman and never pursued it. Do you think she instilled this desire in Betsy?
7. How would you describe the Bridge Ladies' friendship? What do you think keeps them coming back each week for Bridge? When Betsy comments that "Facebook is great, but it won't deliver a pot roast," what is she speaking to? Can you relate?
8. As a child, Betsy glamorized the Bridge Ladies; as a teenager, she found them painfully status quo; as an adult, she comes to know them as courageous, interesting individuals. Do you find them brave? How do you define bravery?
9. At the Bridge table and throughout their lives, the ladies "didn't dwell on their inner lives" and believed pain to be "a private matter." What might be the benefits of not indulging in or sharing one's emotional life? What difficulties might it cause?
10. For five decades the Bridge Ladies treated each other with more "lightly veiled forbearance and exasperation" than affection. What might explain such undemonstrative closeness? How might greater openness and intimacy have changed their relationships for the better? How might it have strained them?
11. Lerner describes her relationship with Roz as "a classic mother-daughter dynamic." What does she mean by this? What elements (personal or social) explain the disconnect in their relationship?

12. When Betsy learned of her grandmother's violent girlhood trauma, she is disappointed to not have been told much earlier in her life, but Roz explains that the cultural priority was to "protect the children" from disturbing truths. What are the benefits of this priority? When and how should children learn about difficulties in the family or in the world?
13. Early into her Bridge education, Lerner senses that "Bridge was a metaphor for many things." What might some of those things be?
14. Consider the nature of marriage for the Bridge Ladies. How would you characterize their relationships with their husbands? What were their priorities? How do you think marriage changed for Betsy's generation? In what ways do you think contemporary marital values are better or worse? Why?
15. When describing her relationship with her husband, Lerner says "independence trumps obligation." What does she mean? What are the advantages of this value in a relationship? What are the risks?
16. After a disturbing trip to Jackie's childhood home, Lerner admits she made a mistake: "My need trumped hers." What is it that Lerner needed? How should a biographer or journalist balance the desire for detail and understanding with her subjects' well-being?
17. Early in her career, Lerner was contacted by many people writing memoirs about their pain and suffering. What's the potential value of telling one's story to the world? How does it compare to the Bridge Ladies' approach to personal difficulty? What might have motivated Lerner to write this book?
18. Lerner admits that saying "I love you" to her mother feels "scariest than not saying it." Why do you think that is?
19. How might the various difficulties in Betsy's family—Roz's accident, Barbara's death, depression—have colored her understanding of her mother and her actions? How might those same difficulties have influenced Roz's understanding of Betsy and her actions?
20. At the end of the book, Betsy quotes a poem that refers to pain as "bags" of cement that people carry. Do you think this is an apt metaphor for the pain her mother carried?
21. Lerner asserts the "old age is nothing if not managing losses: physical ability, appearance, memory, spouses, friends, economic independence, and finally freedom." How do the Bridge Ladies confront these losses? How do you confront them in for your own life?
22. How does being a mother bring Betsy closer to Roz? How does Bridge?
23. Do you have any memories of family members playing Bridge? What do you think the game meant to them?

24. What is the stereotype of a Jewish mother and what about the type is true? What about for the ladies?
25. Roz claims she is an atheist since birth and yet she is devoted to Jewish culture and traditions. How would you define her belief?
26. Betsy's attempt to learn how to make gefilte fish backfires. Why is it so hard for her to connect to her mother even as an adult?
27. All the Bridge Ladies married Jewish men and expected their daughters to as well. Betsy didn't. Others didn't. Has life broken down or changed? For better or for worse?
28. Betsy reveals that she is proud to take her mother to synagogue even as she gives her a hard time. How does this ritual connect them, how does Judaism enrich their lives?