

## The Magnificent Esme Wells

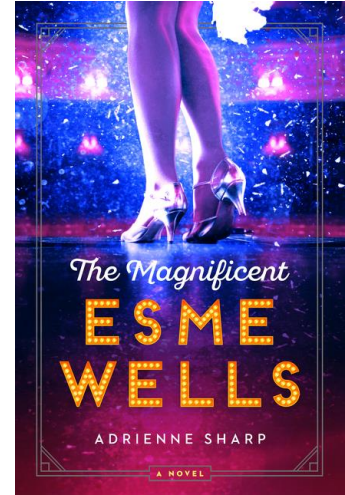
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### Introduction

Esme Silver has always taken care of her charming ne'er-do-well father, Ike Silver, a small-time crook with dreams of making it big with Bugsy Siegel. Devoted to her daddy, Esme is often his "date" at the racetrack, where she amiably fetches the hot dogs while keeping an eye to the ground for any cast-off tickets that may be winners.



In awe of her mother, Dina Wells, Esme is more than happy to be the foil who gets the beautiful Dina into meetings and screen tests with some of Hollywood's greats. When Ike gets an opportunity to move to Vegas—and, in what could at last be his big break, to help the man she knows as "Benny" open the Flamingo Hotel—life takes an unexpected turn for Esme. A stunner like her mother, the young girl catches the attention of Nate Stein, one of the Strip's most powerful men.

Narrated by the twenty-year-old Esme, *The Magnificent Esme Wells* moves between pre-WWII Hollywood and postwar Las Vegas—a golden age when gangsters and movie moguls were often indistinguishable in looks and behavior. Esme's voice—sharp, observant, and with a quiet, mordant wit—chronicles the rise and fall and further fall of her complicated parents, as well as her own painful reckoning with love and life. A coming-of-age story with a tinge of noir, and a tale that illuminates the promise and perils of the American dream and its dreamers, *The Magnificent Esme Wells* is immersive, moving, and compelling.

### Questions for Discussion

1. What particular version of the American Dream is suggested by young Hollywood or Las Vegas?
2. What's relevant and important about the historic time in which the novel is set?
3. Consider Esme's parents, Ike Silver and Dina Wells. What is each of them like? What's the nature of their relationship? What draws them to or repels them from each other?
4. In what ways are Ike and Dina good parents or not? How does the world they create for Esme affect her as she grows up? What are Esme's biggest challenges as a girl?

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5. At 16, Esme realizes that “the transition from girlhood to womanhood turned on a pivot. One day you were a child and then, all at once, you weren’t.” What was the determining moment for her? In what ways is such a profound difference in status exciting or problematic?
  6. What is it about “the movies,” that is so powerful? In what ways are the products of Hollywood—imagination, adventure, and make believe—valuable? In what ways might they be harmful, taken too far?
  7. What, as Esme herself wonders, is it “about the public and about Hollywood that so liked the spectacle of mobsters”? What distinguishing traits existed in Benny Siegel? Mickey Cohen? Nate Stein?
  8. What were the limited roles allowed to women in the worlds of Hollywood and Las Vegas? What harm results from such inequality? In what ways does a similar dynamic still exist or not in the film and entertainment industries? Why is this so?
  9. What made Las Vegas so successful and popular, despite the fact that “the house always won”?
  10. Considering Esme’s relationship with Nate Stein, and her eventual stardom as a showgirl, how much did she remake herself or not from childhood?
  11. During one of her more risqué performances, Esme realizes that her body is not entirely her own, but “a tool, separate from me, an object I manipulated to entertain.” How did this relationship with her own body get created? How does such a relationship affect her physical and psychological health?
  12. What explains Esme dramatic decision to cut off all her hair? What’s implied by such a gesture? What moment from her childhood does it echo?
  13. What personal and cultural implications are presented by the ominous image of reveling casino goers or, near the end of the novel, Esme sitting alone, watching atomic bombs being tested far across the Nevada desert?
  14. Esme eventually realizes that, in addition to the stark threat of criminals like Nate Stein, “something was wrong with [her] father too.” What does she mean? In what ways was Ike different from or better than the mobsters? What might it mean that, as Nate Stein tells her, Ike was always “small-time”?
  15. After so much personal trauma and reckoning, Esme mentions “all the dirty radiant light.” In what ways is such a paradoxical image apt for Las Vegas? For Esme? For life?
  16. What might the future hold for Esme Wells?