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*Shrines of Gaiety* by Kate Atkinson

Meeting date: Wednesday, July 31st, 2024

Time: 2 p.m. & 7 p.m.

Discussion Questions

1. Nellie Coker is a purveyor of gaiety, although she herself is more interested in turning a profit than in having fun. What makes her successful in business? Do those traits also make her a good mother? To what extent do her six children (Edith, Niven, Betty, Shirley, Ramsay, and Kitty) share her priorities and her approach to life? In her household, is it easier to be a son or a daughter?

2. As a woman in the early twentieth century, Gwendolyn is often at a disadvantage. How does she turn the tables on those who try to undermine her? How do her vulnerabilities and secret strengths compare to Edith’s?

3. What sustains Frobisher’s marriage to Lottie? Does Lottie’s addiction mean that she always receives more from Frobisher than she gives, or do they have a marriage of equals, in a way?

4. Freda and Florence come from very different backgrounds but share similar dreams. What does the novel show us about the nature of innocence, and about the nature of evil? When Freda is harassed and attacked by Owen Varley, how is her sense of self shaken? Was Freda in some ways more naïve than Florence?

5. In a novel packed with characters who are leading double lives, what did you discover about the ability to deceive and the performances we all must give in order to participate in the world? What determines whether deception leads to corruption, especially in Maddox’s case?

6. From Gwendolyn’s point of view, what are the fundamental distinctions between Niven and Frobisher? Which man would you have chosen? Does the underground realm of Nellie’s clubs, where physical pleasure is paramount, leave much room for love and romance?

7. Shrines of Gaiety brims with dark humor. How does Kate Atkinson so effectively balance the raw brutality of the novel’s plotlines with moments of sheer comedy, even poking fun at fiction writing itself (through Ramsay’s cocky approach to becoming a novelist)?

8. In what way do the five nightclubs in Nellie’s empire—the Amethyst, the Foxhole, the Pixie, the Crystal Cup, and the Sphinx—reflect varying aspects of her personality? What does her showdown with Azzopardi reveal about her strengths and weaknesses?

9. At the novel’s core is a murder mystery. What were your theories about the identity of the girls’ killer and the motivation behind these tragedies?

10. As you observed the path of the bluebird brooch, from Mr. Ingram to his wife and then to a pawn shop, and finally to Lottie, what did you also observe about the way money changes hands in the novel—and the shifting value of jewelry (and beauty) depending on the circumstances?

11. Although Shrines of Gaiety is a work of fiction, the author’s note describes the real-life Kate Meyrick and other figures who inspired this novel. What is special about the cultural history of London in the 1920s, in the aftermath of war and the introduction of women’s suffrage? In what ways was this simultaneously a time of liberation and oppression?

12. As you read about the characters’ fates, how did you react to the ironies and just deserts? Whose ending surprised you the most? Which characters exemplified your definition of a life well lived?

13. Kate Atkinson is known for her highly inventive storytelling style. How does Shrines of Gaiety extend those unconventional approaches even further, compared to her other novels that you have read?