

Reading Group Guide

Cleaning Nabokov's House

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Introduction

The last straw was the dishwasher. After a decade of marriage, Barbara walks out on her husband, John, while he instructs her on the proper method of loading cups and bowls. A newcomer to John's sleepy hometown in upstate New York, and now a divorcée, Barb feels out of place. John takes custody of their children (the judge is his friend), and Barb gets just one weekend a month of visitation (the social worker is John's new girlfriend). Lonely, depressed, and down to her last pair of pants, Barb spends her last bit of savings on a new house—a house where Vladimir Nabokov once lived and wrote. When Barb discovers an abandoned manuscript in the house, her life takes on new purpose. Opening a “cathouse” that serves passion-starved local women is Barb's remarkable first step to respectability. Client by client and word by word, Barb reclaims her life and prepares for the chance to win back the custody of her children.

Discussion Questions

1. The opening sentences of the book describes the path Barb will take to reinvent herself. Why do you think the author used that technique? What are some other books with first lines that reflect on the whole book?
2. Discuss Barb's “career path.” How does each of her past jobs—*Psychology Now* fact checker, Old Daitch Dairy correspondence manager, cathouse madam, *Babe Ruth* ghost writer— help her in her new incarnation as a romance writer?
3. Discuss the two characters who mean the most to Barb: Sam and Darcy. What are some signs that the children are coping with difficulty following their parents' divorce? What do their collections—Sam's cookbooks and Darcy's purses— reveal about their personalities?
4. According to Barb, “Presentation was my worst talent after marriage.” (p. 96) Track Barb's success in life according to her wardrobe. When do the Pants get her through some tough times? Do you think the people Barb meets in Onkwedo and New York City judge her outfits as much as she fears? Why or why not?
5. Barb imagines Nabokov's manuscript as an “ark”: “Maybe *Babe Ruth* could be the way out: money, legitimacy even, and a way to sail out of this hideous custody mess, sail away from Onkwedo altogether.” (p. 111) In the end, does *Babe Ruth* help Barb solve her life problems? Why or why not? How does it help her sail farther into Onkwedo, rather than out of town?
6. What kind of first impression does Margie, Barb's literary agent, make on the

- telephone? Does Margie meet or defy Barb's expectations when the two women meet in person? Explain.
7. Compare the two men in Barb's life: her "experson" John and her new love interest Greg. How are John and Greg similar, and how are they different? What are some early signs that Greg is a better choice for Barb? What redeeming qualities does John have, and what might be some of Greg's faults?
 8. Compare two interview scenes in *Cleaning Nabokov's House*: Barb's "TVQ interview," when she learns that she's not fit for her fifteen minutes of televised fame, and Barb's selection of crew athletes to staff her cat house. How does Barb fare on each side of the interview table? Which scene do you find more comical, and why?
 9. One of the main themes of the opening of the book is loss and loneliness. Barb is grieving for two family members, her father and her cousin. What kind of example did each of these men set? What inspiration is she able to draw from her memories of them?
 10. As Barb opens the cat house, she thinks, "I decided I was not selling sex; I was selling a fifty minute full-control vacation from your life as you knew it." (p. 168) It's obviously fiction, but how far-fetched is the idea of a cathouse? Is Barb offering women an escape, an empowering alternative to their unsatisfying lives, or is she turning the tables on men, objectifying them the way women are objectified?
 11. Cooking plays a large role in Barb's life. What do we learn about Barb's character through her cooking and eating habits? Which of her many "breakfast identities" do you think suits her personality best?
 12. On her fortieth birthday Barb resolves, "I might not have a plan, but I had to act and act fast." (p. 277) How does this birthday serve as a turning point for Barb? What finally inspires Barb to act: to spend her earnings, furnish her kids' rooms, hire a lawyer, and return to court?
 14. Vladimir and Vera Nabokov are long gone when Barb moves into their house. Even though Barb never meets these characters, how does their imagined presence in the house affect her? What does Barb discover about life and writing through her exploration of Nabokov's work?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. The breed “Bull-Dane” is an invention. If you were going to describe yourself in canine (or feline) terms, what combination of breeds would best describe you?
Through her connection with Matilda, Barb has her first intra-species connection. Do you have an animal bonding story?
2. One of Barb’s puzzlements about her new rural location is what people eat there. She finds the local butter an early point of connection with the place. Have a local foods night at your group, where the snacks are all grown/produced within a hundred mile radius.
3. Turn your book club meeting into Nabokov Night, and screen Stanley Kubrick’s 1962 movie adaptation of Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Or the more recent *Lolita* with Jeremy Irons.
4. Barb notices a lot of things about other people, both strangers and friends. Think of someone you saw today that you don’t know. It could be a clerk at a store, or someone sitting in another car at a traffic light. Make a guess about their life. Do they live alone? Do they have a hobby? If they could have exactly the life they wanted what would it be?
5. There is no cathouse in your town. But if you were going to organize an afternoon of pleasure and relaxation for the group, what would it look like: Massages? Hiking? Saunas? Take in a baseball game? Art museum and café? Roller Derby Match? Spa day? Now...do it?!