

ALYSON RICHMAN

The Velvet Hours

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The author references shadow and light in the novel. Discuss the aspects of shadow and light in Marthe de Florian's life, as well as in Solange's. Do you think both women come to terms with their pasts at the end of their lives? Or is there an element of regret?
2. Charles gives Marthe the gift of the pearls partly as a gift of beauty, but also as a gift of financial security. Do you think Marthe does the right thing when she sells the necklace?
3. Marthe is not educated, yet she is immensely curious. How would you describe her self-education? Do you think her material possessions reflect her pursuit of knowledge?
4. Marthe belongs to the demimondaine, the world of secret pleasure. What do you think of Marthe being a kept woman? Do you think it enabled her to be more liberated than married women in French society, or was her life more restricted?
5. Discuss the essential role the Barcelona Haggadah played in the novel. For example, it enables Solange to learn more about her ancestry, it brings her into the Armels' bookstore and also, in the end, enables Solange and the Armels to gain safe passage. What else did the Haggadah bring to the overall story?
6. Above all, Marthe loves art and beauty. The author describes the sumptuous furnishings in the apartment, the butterfly- and bird- painted china, the fresh flowers, the rose-scented baths, and the gold-embossed stationery. Do we have these rituals of beauty in the twenty-first century? Are there any of these lost rituals that you'd like to bring back into your daily life?
7. Solange and Marthe forge an unlikely friendship. What do you think they each teach each other through their friendship?
8. Solange says: "What I realized at that moment was that my grandmother believed that as long as the apartment remained the way she had created it—her portrait above the mantel, her collection of porcelains, and the other pieces of art she had hand selected she was convinced her memory would also not be extinguished." Do you think that heirlooms help us maintain a memory of our loved ones, or are our shared stories what help connect us to the past? Are the two linked? How? Is one more important than the other? Do you own something that is linked with a story, and does it connect you with the past?