

AMERICAN ROSE

- 1.** Karen Abbott has said in interviews that she structured *American Rose* like a striptease: revealing a bit, retreating, then revealing more, moving back and forth through time, until the entire narrative is revealed. Did you think this was the most effective and entertaining way to tell a sweeping story like Gypsy's? Did you find the book more challenging because of the structure?
- 2.** Gypsy's mother, Rose Hovick, is widely considered the original "Stage Mother," desperate to achieve fame and fortune through her children, at any cost. Do you think her actions were at all justified? Did you sympathize with her at any point? What modern-day mothers might you compare to Rose?
- 3.** The Minsky brothers considered burlesque to be a viable art form, as culturally important as other American inventions like baseball or jazz. Do you agree that there's a difference between burlesque and what goes on inside strip clubs? Where do you personally draw the line between art and pornography? The line between promoting female performers and exploiting them?
- 4.** Gypsy's rise to fame coincided with the worst economic time in American history. Why did burlesque thrive during the Great Depression? Would you have gone as far as Gypsy did to survive? Do you know any stories about your own family's circumstances during the Great Depression?
- 5.** What satisfaction can be derived from a nonfiction book like *American Rose* that can't be from a novel? In what ways does the book read like a novel?
- 6.** One of the overarching themes in *American Rose* is the question of identity: Rose tampers with her daughters' names and ages; the Minsky patriarch changes his name to escape Russia; Gypsy sheds "Louise Hovick" when she becomes a star. How did these incidents affect each character and inform the way they lived their lives?
- 7.** Abbott has called vaudeville "the reality TV of the 1920s." Would you

agree with this assessment? Which act described in the book would you most like to see? If you had been in vaudeville, what would've been your "talent"?

8. The Minsky brothers griped that the showgirls working for "legitimate" Broadway producers such as Florenz Ziegfeld showed just as much skin as Minskys' stripteasers, yet critics and law enforcement treated them differently: Ziegfeld shows were "art" while Minsky shows were "indecent." Why do you think there was such a disparity in the way they were viewed? Did you agree with Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia's decision to shut the Minskys down, or do you think the brothers were victims of censorship?

9. *American Rose* explores the idea of sibling rivalry. How did Rose's treatment of her daughters influence their interactions and relationship? Do you think the sisters were fair to one another? Who did you sympathize with more?

10. Abbott makes a clear distinction between the girl who was born Louise Hovick and the woman who became Gypsy Rose Lee. How did Gypsy the person view Gypsy Rose Lee, the creation? What did Gypsy like about her creation, and what did she struggle with? How did one affect the other? Do you think Gypsy was ultimately proud of what she'd become?

11. Gypsy's story begins at the turn of the 20th century and ends in 1970, unfolding simultaneously with several major events in American history. How did Gypsy affect the times, and how did they affect her? Abbott has called Gypsy "the secret love child of Dorothy Parker and Lady Gaga." What current personalities would you compare to Gypsy Rose Lee? Why has she captured American's imagination for so long?

12. Gypsy obviously had a very complicated relationship with her mother. Do you believe they loved each other? Do you believe either of them was capable of love at all? June called Rose "a beautiful little ornament that was damaged." Do you think Rose Hovick was merely eccentric, or was she mentally ill?

13. What was your personal opinion of Gypsy? Did you like her? Find her intimidating? Admire her? Did your feelings toward her shift along the way?