



Reading Guide

for

THE ARROGANT YEARS

by Lucette Lagnado

- 1) **EGYPT'S GOLDEN ERA:** Lucette Lagnado opens the Egypt section of her book with a description of Cairo in the 1920s and 1930s, a time when she says the different ethnic and religious groups lived in harmony and Jews held very high positions in this Muslim society. Is it still possible to imagine in our Post-9/11 universe a world where Jews and Muslims and Christians would live, and thrive, together in the same culture? What was it about King Fouad's Egypt that made that possible, that hasn't been the case in decades?
- 2) **A WOMAN IN EGYPT:** Lagnado's mother, Edith, stands out because she pursues her education, reads avidly, and gets a job as a teacher and librarian in 1930s Cairo. Yet she abandons her job when she becomes engaged to be married. How common was that in the world beyond Cairo – wasn't it the same dilemma women faced even in America until fairly recently? How did the women's movement of the 1970s change that, and is it changing back – with more and more young women electing to give up careers when they marry and have a family?
- 3) **WHAT ARE "ARROGANT YEARS"?** What is the meaning of "arrogant years"? Is it only the purview of young women to have "arrogant years," that time when they are at their prettiest and most self-confident – can the idea also apply to men?
- 4) **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WOMEN'S SECTION:** Lagnado's narrative opens in a small synagogue of her childhood where women sit sequestered from the men. Lagnado describes herself as both loving the section and wanting to break out of it. Discuss importance of the notion of dividers throughout the book; at the end does she feel differently about the women's section?
- 5) **THE DIVIDER AS A SYMBOL OF THE WORLD BEFORE THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND WHAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE:** Late in the book, Lagnado remarks that the last several decades were ones in which women generally – women who weren't observant Jews– also broke down barriers and, in a sense, went to sit with the men. But she seems bittersweet about this – discuss her ambivalence toward some of the achievements of the feminist movement. What was it about the world of the women's section that the author came to miss, and what relevance does it hold for women coming of age now?
- 6) **REBUILDING THE HEARTH:** The theme of family and home are central to this book even as Lagnado depicts the unraveling of a family in America. Discuss the pressures that families face in this country and what makes children leave to live thousands of miles apart from their loved ones. Are there any signs this is changing?

7) **THE CARE OF THE ELDERLY:** A subtext of this book is how wretchedly the elderly fare in modern American society. Is Lagnado fair to the medical and nursing home system that has evolved the last several decades to care for the elderly?

8) **THE MYSTERY OF THE PASHA'S WIFE:** The narrative is carried by the mystery of the Pasha's wife—who was she and what was the meaning of the key? Discuss the significance of the relationship between Mrs. Cattai Pasha and young Edith.

9) **SUPERSTITION AND THE "EVIL EYE":** Lagnado is troubled by the sense that her family is cursed, that long ago a hex was put on them and that each member has suffered as a result. Discuss the significance of these superstitious beliefs. Do they have any place or relevance in modern-day America?

10) **ILLNESS AND ITS AFTERMATH:** The notion of "sequelae" – of the psychological after-effects of a major illness – plays a major role in the book. Does Lagnado ever overcome her bout with Hodgkin's at 16? Is there ever any closure, any sense that she has gotten beyond it or is the reader left feeling she is still suffering the after-effects?