

Reading Guide

for

THE MAN IN THE WHITE SHARKSKIN SUIT

by Lucette Lagnado

Introduction

In vivid and graceful prose, Lucette Lagnado recreates the majesty and cosmopolitan glamour of Cairo in the years between WWII and Nasser's rise to power. Her father, Leon, was a boulevardier who bore a striking resemblance to Carry Grant and conducted his business in the elaborate lobby of the Nile Hilton, dressed in his signature white sharkskin suit. Lagnado brings to life the color and culture of Cairo's sidewalk cafes and nightclubs, the markets and the quiet Jewish homes of the ancient city. But with Nasser's nationalization of Egyptian industry, Leon and his family lose everything. As streets are renamed and neighborhoods of their fellow Jews are disbanded, they, too, must make their escape. Packed into 26 suitcases, their jewels hidden in sealed tins of anchovies, Leon and his family depart for any land that will take them.

From Cairo to Paris to New York, the poverty and hardships they encounter make a striking contrast to the beauty and comfort of old Cairo. As their lives become an inversion of the American dream, though, "The resilient dignity of Lucette's family transcends the fiercest of obstacles," writes the Los Angeles Times Book Review. Set against the stunning portraits of three world cities, this memoir offers a grand and sweeping story of family, tradition, tragedy and triumph in their epic exodus from paradise.

Questions for Discussion

1. Author Lagnado dedicates her book in part to the memory of her parents yet does Leon emerge as a sympathetic character at the end—in spite of his flaws—or are his trespasses and libertine ways—not to mention his ill-treatment of his wife—simply unforgivable to any enlightened reader? Is it clear how the author feels about her father and in particular his womanizing ways? If you do find Leon to be likable, how come? How does the author make you appreciate Leon even as you become painfully aware of his shortcomings?
2. Is Edith given her due or is she given short-shrift? Should we know about her much much more than we do... why, for example, does she turn down the publishing job at Grolier, a position that would have given the family needed income and given her a sense of self-worth, an identity beyond that of wife and mother? Is she a shadowy figure, at the end? Is Edith ultimately sacrificed—as she was in the marriage to some degree—to the more charismatic Leon, The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit?

3. What became of the Wayward Daughter, Suzette, and of the two brothers; should there have been a post-script to tell us how each ended up? Are readers cheated in a way because they don't know their fates and are forced to speculate in effect on what happened to them?

4. Loulou seems wistful about the life she left behind, and she casts a sentimental eye on the relations between Jews and Moslems in this corner of the Arab world, certainly as they co-existed in her parents' era; and even when she returns, while she notes the physical decay in Egypt, she sees only love and sweetness in the Egyptians that she meets. Is this a credible portrait of Arab-Jewish relations in post-9/11 world and also why is she not acknowledging the bitterness and anger that her family almost surely felt and continued to feel after being pushed to leave Egypt?

5. Illness is the running subtext of this book—as is the search for the miraculous, the supernatural. What is the role of superstition for Loulou and her family and do they ever shed their superstitious ways when they come to this country?

6. Lagnado casts a cold eye on the American Dream—perhaps her least sympathetic figure in the book is the social worker, Silvia Kirschner, who is trying to urge the family to assimilate. Yet in the eyes of the author, her family's experience is an unremitting nightmare. Does Kirschner have redemptive qualities that ought to have been underscored? Is this a fair portrayal of the shattered hopes of an immigrant family, and is it fair on Lagnado's part to dismiss what America has given her and her family.

7. Similarly, she is not especially kind to the feminist movement, either—at one point she lovingly recalls her father suggesting she become a flower-vendor . . . and at another she remarks on how self-absorbed she and her siblings became in their work, to the detriment of Leon and Edith—is this a fair indictment of the movement? Or is it ironic for her to condemn it even as she has clearly profited from the movement which enabled her to pursue her professional goals to become a journalist and ultimately the author of *Sharkskin* . . .

8. Lagnado casts a ruthless eye on the American health system, its hospitals and in particular its nursing homes. The Jewish Home and Hospital is seen as a cruel uncaring facility that devotes more love on its fish than its patients; Mt. Sinai Medical Center in New York is seen as inferior to the Demerdash Hospital in Cairo. How do the author's experiences and her ordeal navigating these facilities compare with yours? Could you identify with her struggles or did you find the world as she portrayed it as foreign as WW2 Cairo?