

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS for *The Appetites of Girls*

1. The four main characters in the novel grow up in homes with very different family dynamics. How do the dynamics in each of their childhood homes shape how they view themselves? In what ways do their upbringings inform the attachments they make or, at times, their inability to attach as they grow older? How is the relationship each girl has with her mother reflected in her behavior? How does that relationship affect the choices each girl makes?
2. How do the characters in the book use food to exert power over others? How do they use it in attempts to gain mastery of themselves and their own worlds? Have you ever used food to try to attain control in a relationship or in your own life?
3. The word *appetites* in the book's title refers to a desire for food, but it alludes to other appetites as well. What are the deepest longings of the four main characters? How do Setsu, Fran, Opal, and Ruth use food as a substitute for deeper hungers? How do we sometimes do so in our own lives?
4. When the four young women first meet as college suitemates, Ruth wonders what she could possibly have in common with the other three. Opal tells us, "It seemed to me that friends washed in and out of one's life like pebbles tumbling in the surf." But over the years, the four establish a lasting bond. As their friendship deepens, what strengths do the women gain from one another? What challenges does each find in her relationship with the others? How does the friendship cause each woman to face truths about herself she otherwise might not see?
5. Fran and Ruth are plump; Setsu is waifishly thin; Opal has a figure men ogle with longing and women scrutinize with envy. Despite their physical differences, what struggles with body image do the four friends have in common? How do their challenges differ? In our own culture, do women share challenges with body image regardless of their appearance? Is our society more relaxed about body image than it once was, and do we have a broader concept of what is physically attractive or acceptable than we did in the past? Or is the reverse true?

6. For each of the friends, the journey to find herself includes learning to make choices in romance that bring happiness and strength; but all four make mistakes along the way. Why does Ruth make the decisions she does with Gavin? For what reason or reasons is Setsu susceptible to James's manipulations? Why is Opal so quick to dismiss Daniel's interest in her, and Fran to dismiss Sanjeev's? If you were a fifth college suitemate, what advice about relationships with men would you give to each of the friends?

7. Ruth's mother and father are from immigrant families, and Ruth's mother holds on to connections and traditions from "the old country," often discouraging her daughter from embracing what is foreign or unfamiliar in modern American culture. In what ways does she attempt to hold Ruth back? Are there instances in which she is right in rejecting the new and working to preserve the old? What expectations are placed on the other girls by their parents? Which of these expectations are fair, and which unfair?

8. Some weeks after Amara has left, Opal tells us, "But I was beginning to see that at some point, yes, we had to cut loose old hurts, or they would swell and swell until they infected the parts of our true selves that remained." It is this understanding that eventually sets her free. What epiphanies do the other women have about the choices they have made? Why do these moments of revelation come at crisis points in their lives? Have you had such a moment in your life?

9. Setsu's fullest expression of herself is through her music, and Ruth finds herself, in part, through writing. For Opal, it is painting and sketching, and Francesca, too, is attracted to the fine arts. In one form or another, art is significant to a number of characters in the book. Is there something about art that reaches beyond our conscious understanding? Can it call us to something higher or greater in ourselves?

10. In the opening of the book, Ruth says, "Years ago we could not have dreamed we would ever be this picture of contentment. But no storms rage forever, not even those that whirl within us. Yes, each of us was stronger than she knew. Even I." What are the self-destructive tendencies the characters must overcome in order to find who they are meant to be? Is each of us born with some "bit of darkness" in us as well as strength, and is it part of our purpose in life to claim what is strong within? Is what is strongest in us the truest part of ourselves, as the book suggests?