

# All the Beautiful Girls

by Elizabeth J. Church

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## About the Book

It was unimaginable. When she was eight years old, Lily Decker somehow survived the auto accident that killed her parents and sister, but neither her emotionally distant aunt nor her all-too-attentive uncle could ease her grief. Dancing proves to be Lily's only solace, and eventually she receives a "scholarship" to a local dance academy --- courtesy of a mysterious benefactor.

Grown and ready to leave home for good, Lily changes her name to Ruby Wilde and heads to Las Vegas to be a troupe dancer, but her sensual beauty and voluptuous figure land her work instead as a showgirl performing everywhere from Les Folies Bergere at the Tropicana to the Stardust's Lido de Paris. Wearing costumes dripping with feathers and rhinestones, five-inch heels, and sky-high headdresses, Ruby may have all the looks of a Sin City success story, but she still must learn to navigate the world of men --- and figure out what real love looks like.

With her uncanny knack for understanding the hidden lives of women, Elizabeth J. Church captures both the iconic extravagance of an era and the bravery of a young woman who dances through her sadness to find connection, freedom and, most important, herself.

## Discussion Guide

1. Lily is resilient, a survivor. What aspects of her personality and life make her that, as opposed to a victim? Do you think some people choose --- consciously or not --- to become resilient, as opposed to victims?
2. Aunt Tate is a mixed bag --- one moment she's a strict, seemingly unfeeling disciplinarian, the next, she's quietly leaving gifts for Lily. Have you ever known someone like Aunt Tate? What makes Aunt Tate tick?
3. Lily has no one she can trust enough to tell about Uncle Miles's abuse. How have things changed for girls who suffer

childhood abuse? How do things still need to change?

**4.** Why doesn't Lily hate the Aviator? Why does she seem to forgive the Aviator right from the start?

**5.** What roles do books play in Lily/Ruby's life? How do books help her find her way and provide her with support? Is there a book that helped you cope with a difficult period in your own life?

**6.** Shame plays a large part in this novel: Lily feels shame about her childhood and her choice of Javier, the Aviator feels shame about the car accident, and homosexual men of the time were taught to feel shame about their sexuality. How do the characters overcome or transform their shame? In what ways, does shame determine each character's course in life?

**7.** Why does Aunt Tate choose Uncle Miles over Lily? Do you think if Lily had revealed her abuse to Aunt Tate earlier, there would have been a different outcome?

**8.** Lily's dance recital piece is an effort to communicate her uncle's abuse and her inability to escape. Ultimately, Lily/Ruby uses dance to free herself, to enjoy her body in a way that brings her joy, to give herself a voice, and to use a form of power --- especially power over men. What other ways do you think dance proves vital to Lily/Ruby? What does dance do for, or give, any of us?

**9.** Ruby is required to "mix" with men but finds it challenging. Why is it so hard for her? What do her relationships with the men who travel through the casinos teach her? What do those relationships tell her about herself?

**10.** Ruby accumulates wealth but remains unsatisfied. Why do you think this is so for her, and for many others?

**11.** What role does Las Vegas play in the novel, in American culture in the sixties, and, most particularly, in Ruby's growth as a young woman?

**12.** Ruby's friendships with Vivid, Rose and Dee sustain and challenge her. What is special about women's friendships, and about the ways in which women support one another?

**13.** Javier is abusive, but he does not go so far as to blacken Ruby's eyes or beat her senseless. Where is the line between abuse and poor treatment? How does a woman decide when to leave a relationship, and when to hang in there and keep trying?

**14.** Ruby has long been wanting to join in the protests or otherwise engage with the changes the youth culture is endeavoring to make. Why then does she fare so poorly when she meets with the UNLV protest group? What sets her apart?

**15.** After she returns from Vietnam, why doesn't Ruby report Javier to the police and have him charged with theft?

**16.** Lily/Ruby struggles with what she feels is her flawed compass when it comes to determining whom she can trust and finding love. What has led to this state of uncertainty for her? Do you feel you have an accurate fix on trust, or on finding the right partner? What helps us to learn how to better make these important choices?

17. Would you want to travel back in time to classic Las Vegas? Why or why not?

18. Would you want to be a showgirl? Why or why not?

19. The Aviator and Jack must keep their love for each other a closely guarded secret. How has society changed since the sixties? How might things be regressing, and why? What societal fears limit the expression of love to male-female relationships?

20. Do you think that Lily will ever be able to find and sustain a healthy, loving relationship with a man? Why or why not?

21. How does Sloane's existence change Lily's perception of herself? How do the experiences of Lily's childhood affect how Lily is and will be as a parent?

22. What actors would you cast if there were a film version of ALL THE BEAUTIFUL GIRLS?

## Author Bio

Elizabeth J. Church grew up in the mountains of northern New Mexico. She practiced law for over 30 years in Albuquerque before mustering the courage and fortitude required to reach for her dream of becoming an author. She is the author of THE ATOMIC WEIGHT OF LOVE. ALL THE BEAUTIFUL GIRLS is Church's second novel.

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