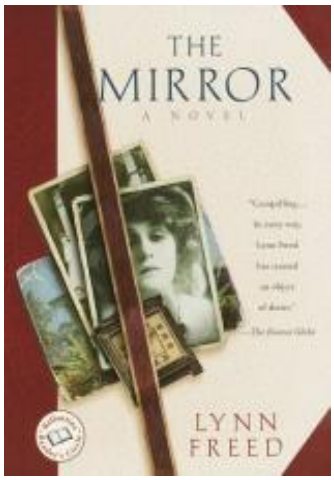
The Mirror

by Lynn Freed



About the Book

In 1920, Agnes La Grange leaves a poor life in England for Durban, South Africa, to make her future. In the house of the Jewish family where she first works as a maid, the wife is dying--which doesn't keep the husband from sneaking to Agnes's room to make love while watching in a mirror he's given her. His unrestrained passion for her (old and a head shorter he may be) leads her to say, "I have never felt so strongly the power of being alive." And that's in truth the only power Agnes ever wants or values. During her pregnancy, the "old Jew," as she calls him bluntly but without judgment, puts her up in the Railway Hotel--an establishment of which, after the birth of her daughter Leah, she becomes owner and new proprietress by finessing the old man into putting up the money. From then on, Agnes is on her way. "The newspaperman" will be a weak and soon-divorced husband, followed by such lovers as Agnes finds attractive--"the banker," "the hunter," and "the trader." Agnes doesn't even read the papers, but her beauty, life, and business sense draw others to her, seeing her through the Depression and WWII as she's cheated but recovers, buys more property, sees Leah become a famous singer--although not before Leah does just what Agnes did in seducing a husband (readers will find out whose), leaving Agnes a gorgeous child to raise as a second daughter. Forget improprieties: As Agnes says, "this wasn't a story . . . this was a life."

Discussion Guide

1. What is the role of **The Mirror** in the story? In what way might the novel itself be considered a mirror?

2. Agnes undertakes many risks in the course of the novel. What are they? Are there risks she avoids taking? Can you explain this?

3. What are the things that Agnes determines for herself as either desirable or necessary? Do these change over the course of her life? What are the things she cannot make happen? What, if any, are her unfulfilled longings?

4. What does Agnes give up for her freedom? What does she gain?

5. Are independence and love mutually exclusive for this main character? What role does love play for the other characters in the book?

6. What are the values that Agnes subscribes to? What about Sarah or Leah? How would you rank these same values for yourself?

7. What other female protagonists are memorable for pushing the edges of conventional society? How are they like Agnes and how do they differ? Are there male counterparts that you would put in the same category? How do they differ from the female characters?

8. From the beginning of the novel Agnes wears a small purse around her neck. What is the meaning of this image? When the purse reappears at different points later in the novel, is its meaning the same?

9. What issues of class are brought up in the novel? Does class play a role in the story?

10. Why does Agnes identify the men and the mother-in-law in her story without reference to their names?

11. How would you describe the tone of the narrative? What sort of voice and manner of speaking do you imagine the narrator to have?

12. Are there any quotations from the novel that you found striking? Choose a few and discuss how they affected you.

13. Describe the relationship between Agnes and Leah. What other mother-daughter characters in novels or film come to mind? What comparisons can you make?

14. Compare the ways Sarah, Agnes, and Leah each looks at her own past and future. How do those different views influence the way they see themselves and each other?

15. Can you remember your own earliest sense of yourself? How did it come about? Did it change over time? How did you get a sense of that change?

16. Leah finds herself caught between two strong and different women. Is she like either of them? How does she deal with their competition for her?

17. Agnes says toward the end of the novel that she was "homesick for the future I'd once looked forward to." What do you think she means by that?

18. What themes of the novel are revisited in the last chapter? What conclusions does the narrator come to about these ideas?

19. What is it in the Byron poem at the front of the book that is well suited to the novel?

20. This novel is written in the form of a journal or memoir. Of what value is it to the narrator to tell her story? If you

were writing a memoir of your own life, what sorts of truths would you tell or omit? On what basis would you make those selections?

Author Bio

Lynn Freed was born and grew up in Durban, South Africa, where two of her previous novels--**Home Ground** and **The Bungalow**--are set. Ms. Freed's stories and essays have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Story*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and elsewhere. She lives in Sonoma, California.

Critical Praise

(Santa Cruz) "Sultry and forthright, Agnes is a vivid character, and her story should appeal to fans of literary fiction. "

The Mirror
by Lynn Freed

Publication Date: January 9, 1999
Paperback: 256 pages
Publisher: Ballantine Books
ISBN-10: 0345426894
ISBN-13: 9780345426895