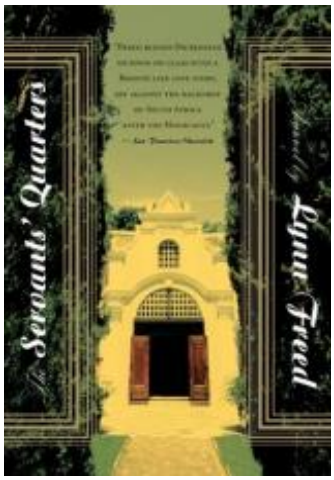
The Servants' Quarters

by Lynn Freed



About the Book

Haunted by phantoms of World War II and the Holocaust, young Cressida lives in terror of George Harding, who, severely disfigured, has returned from the front to recover on his family?s African estate. When Harding plucks young Cressida?s beautiful mother and family from financial ruin, establishing them in the old servants? quarters, Cressida is swept into a life inexorably bound to his.

In her new setting, she is conscripted to enliven Harding?s nephew, the hopelessly timid Edgar, to make him ?wild and daring.? She takes on this task with resentful fury, leading the boy astray and, in the process, learning to manipulate the disparities of power, class, and ambition. All the while, Harding himself is watching her. And waiting.

The Servants? Quarters, a complex and sophisticated love story, evokes a vanishing world of privilege with a Pygmalion twist. It is, as Amy Tan said, ?Freed?s best novel yet.?

Discussion Guide

1. Cressida begins by telling us that she was singled out as the scapegoat in her family. Is she right? How do the other characters cope with being ?punished? by fate?

2. What does Cressida?s mother, Muriel, teach Cressida about women and power?

3. What aspects of Cressida?s world are captured in the novel?s title? What determines whether the characters rise or fall in terms of status? Is money the only force that drives class roles in the South African society presented on these pages? To what degree is anti-Semitism a factor?

4. How might the novel have unfolded if it had been told from Phineas?s point of view? What strategies has he

developed for surviving a life that will always place him in the servants? quarters?

5. Did your opinion of Mr. Harding change as Cressida grew from a child into a woman? Why is he drawn to being a caregiver? What does he receive in exchange for shepherding the children of others?

6. How did you react when you discovered the real reasons behind Cressida?s father?s injuries? How was she affected by her lifelong idealization of him, regarding him as essentially perfect?

7. The specter of war haunts most of the novel?s characters. What happens when Cressida confronts her nightmares? Are the effects of the photographs of concentration camps, and of Mr. Harding?s disfigurement, permanent?

8. Muriel feels superior to Mr. Ledson --- particularly in terms of intelligence and class. Is she indeed superior to him, or is he in some ways superior to her? Would you have been willing to pursue marriage with him if you had been in Muriel?s shoes?

9. What does Mr. Harding?s definition of an ideal man appear to be --- someone who avoids ?showing off? (which, he says, led to his severe injuries) or someone who is brave yet cautious? How does he resolve these contradictions in his adoption of Edgar? Does Edgar benefit from this adoption?

10. What new approach to womanhood does Mrs. Bourne-Thomas give Cressida? What reasons does Muriel have to be jealous?

11. What accounts for the differences between Cressida and her sister, Miranda?

12. What caused Cressida?s resentment of Mr. Harding to fade? What was his greatest legacy to her?

13. What do the closing images of Guy Bourne-Thomas reveal about the kind of adult Cressida has become?

14. In what ways does **The Servants? Quarters** enhance the depictions of love and loss that Freed presented in her previous novels, stories, and essays? What new facets of her native South Africa does she share in Cressida?s story?

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

"A story of civilization and savagery, brisk as a strong cup of tea."

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