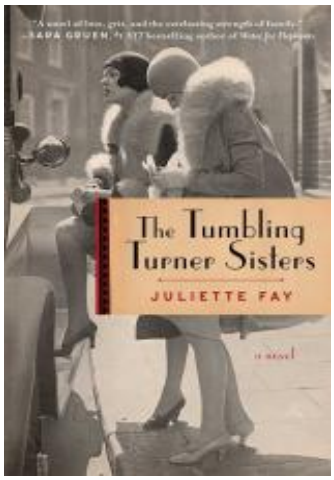
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# The Tumbling Turner Sisters

by Juliette Fay




## About the Book

In 1919, the four Turner sisters and their parents are barely scraping along. Their father is a low-paid boot stitcher in Johnson City, NY, and the Turners are always one paycheck away from eviction. When their father?s hand is crushed and he?s forced to quit, their domineering mother decides that the vaudeville stage is their best --- and only --- chance for salvation.

With everything at stake, the Tumbling Turners take to the road and the four young women, teenagers Gert, Winnie, and Kit and Nell, a 22-year-old new mother and recent widow of the Great War, are soon immersed in the tumultuous world of American Vaudeville on a nine-city tour that will make or break them. Swindlers and ne'er-do-wells await in abundance, but so does kindness, and just maybe a chance at love. Equal parts heartwarming, charming and reflective, THE TUMBLING TURNER SISTERS is the story of the sacrifices we make in the name of family, and how the most unlikely choice can ultimately be the one to lead us toward our truest selves.

## Discussion Guide

**Introduction**

It?s 1919, and in the world of entertainment, vaudeville is king. Nell, Gert, Winnie, and Kit Turner love going to vaudeville shows but have no interest in becoming performers themselves until their household is rocked by tragedy and they are faced with eviction. Along with their starstruck mother and Nell?s infant son, they hit the road as the Tumbling Turner Sisters, an acrobatic act that eventually lands them on the thriving vaudeville circuit. As they perform with a host of legendary acts (and some unsavory rivals), brash Gert and bookish Winnie encounter everything from hardworking dreamers to fast-talking swindlers. When their paths cross with Tip, a handsome African-American dancer who quickly steals Gert?s heart, they must decide what they?re willing to risk in a world that is far more complicated than they could have foretold. As the crowds applaud and the footlights blaze, the Turner sisters must balance the societal constraints of

the day with the independent women they are learning to become.

**Topics & Questions for Discussion**

**1.** Early in the novel, Gert muses about what she?s willing to do to have ?a bigger, better life.? Going on tour certainly gives her a broader view of the world, but by the end of the novel, would you say her life is better? How does Gert?s definition of a better life change?

**2.** In many ways, gender roles in the Turner family are reversed: the women become the providers and work outside of the home, while Mr. Turner leads a more domestic life after his injury. Were you surprised by the amount of freedom women in the 1910s were depicted as having in the novel? Why or why not?

**3.** On p. 72, the Turners get a kick out of Kit?s newfound mastery of vaudeville slang. What familiar phrases were you most surprised to find had vaudeville roots?

**4.** Winnie, Gert, and Tip share a sense of being trapped by others? expectations, exemplified in the competing concepts of ?blacking up? and ?living large.? In what ways do they fight society?s prejudices, and in what ways must they find compromises?

**5.** At the beginning of Chapter 18, Gert says: ?You think your heart belongs to you, and you can order it around, but you can?t. You belong to *it*.? Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?

**6.** Mrs. Turner is even more excited to join the world of vaudeville than her girls are. Why is vaudeville so appealing to her? What does it offer that her life at home does not? Could you relate to her? Why or why not?

**7.** Fay opens each chapter with a quote from a famous real-life contemporary of the fictional Turner sisters, including singers, dancers, acrobats, and comedians. Which quotation resonated most with you?

**8.** ?How much bending of oneself was necessary to nurture one?s love for someone with differing views?? (p. 253). Though Winnie wonders about this in terms of her romance with Joe, apply this same question to Nell, Gert, and Kit. In what ways does each of the sisters risk conflict with others by being themselves?

**9.** What elements of this story felt most modern to you? What elements felt the most old-fashioned?

**10.** ?Success in show business depends on your ability to make and keep friends.? Chapter 20 opens with this quote by singer Sophie Tucker. Think of some ways in which the Turners? adventures in vaudeville prove this statement. In what ways do their friendships either bring them success or put their careers in jeopardy?

**11.** Think of ways in which each girl takes on leadership qualities over the course of the novel. How do these differ from one another? Who would you consider the ?leader? of the Turner sisters?

**12.** Though Nell?s husband, Harry, never appears in the novel, his influence lives on in the Turners? lives. How are Nell, Winnie and Gert each affected by his loss? How does his memory and legacy affect their choices throughout the book?

**13.** Which of the vaudeville acts described in THE TUMBLING TURNER SISTERS would you most like to see live?

**Enhance Your Book Club**

**1.** Vaudeville blossomed from coast to coast from the 1880s to the 1920s, and as Juliette Fay states in the introduction (and the Turners learn as they go on the road), even tiny towns would turn out in force to see the latest, greatest live acts. Do some research and see if your own town or a nearby one had a vaudeville theatre. If it still stands, take a field trip to see it. Can you imagine the Turners playing there?

**2.** Have each of your members pick a real figure who is mentioned in the novel, such as Margaret Sanger, Rita Hayworth or Cary Grant. Do a short presentation on your chosen person for the rest of the book club, complete with images, recordings or video if they exist.

**3.** On their romantic date at the legendary Maramor restaurant in Columbus, Ohio, Winnie and Joe try a ?new drink? called a Singapore Sling, a sweet and fruity classic cocktail. While there are many variations, here?s a basic recipe. Make a batch for your book club!

*Add ¾ oz. gin, ¼ oz. Grand Marnier, ¼ oz. cherry liqueur, 1 oz. pineapple juice, and ½ oz. lime juice to an ice-filled shaker. Shake, and strain into a highball glass, then top off the mixture with club soda. Garnish with pineapple, orange, and a maraschino cherry.*

## Author Bio

Juliette Fay is the bestselling author of eight novels, including CITY OF FLICKERING LIGHT and the *USA Today* bestseller THE TUMBLING TURNER SISTERS. A graduate of Boston College and Harvard University, she lives in Massachusetts.


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**Publication Date:** January 3, 2017
**Genres:** Fiction, Historical Fiction
**Paperback:** 352 pages
**Publisher:** Gallery Books
**ISBN-10:** 1501145347
**ISBN-13:** 9781501145346