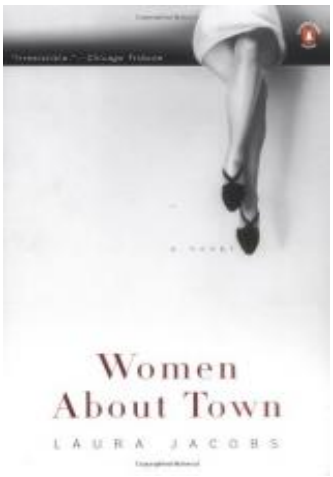
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Women About Town

by Laura Jacobs



About the Book

To be a single woman in a big city is a kind of tightrope actyou're very much alone, trying to keep your balance, and go forward. **Women About Town** is about two women, each making her way in Manhattan.

Iris Biddle, a divorce, has returned to the city out of necessity. She is known for making impeccable custom lampshadescreations as elegant and poetic as she is. Though her shades are the most expensive in town, her career is one of tight finances with little margin for error. Iris is turning forty when the book begins, and determined to take it gracefully. Still, it's hard to move ahead very fast when you're constantly glancing backward.

Lana Burton, thirty-four and unfazed, is an eager young theater critic delighted to have landed in Manhattan. She is moving up the New York hierarchy one step at a time, and in the process learning that some friends resent a slow climb as much as a fast one. Meanwhile, she's trying to figure out the best way to bring her relationship with her boyfriend to the next levelliving together.

I began the book as a series of sketches, written to amuse my husband. After a day's work, I would sit down and try to capture as precisely as possible the kind of frissons and contretemps that are a day-to-day reality for us all, but are so often ignored in fictionmainly because they don't seem dramatic enough. But a misunderstanding, an offhand insult, a sudden pang of memorythese moments bristle with drama and are the things women discuss endlessly with friends.

You'll also notice that finances are a nagging consideration in the book, especially for Iris. New York City is extremely expensive compared with other citiesrent can be half your salary. And the finances of people in the artspeople who are the lifeblood of New York Citycan be shockingly hand-to-mouth, even if the person is considered a success. And with its millions of ambitious people cramped on a tiny island, everyone's elbowing for space and success, which can be very daunting if you're a "good girl," brought up to behave in a certain way. It takes enormous focus and spine to make it in New York while staying true to your ideals.

Over the course of two years, we come to know Iris and Lana intimatelythe epiphanies, joys, and losses that have made them who they are. And we watchthrough everyday excursions, events, confrontations, and contemplationsas each finds her very own way into the next phase of her life.

Discussion Guide

1. Iris Biddle and Lana Burton are six years apart in age, but much wider apart in experience. What were the defining moments of Iris's adulthood? What about Lana's?

2. What does Iris's approach to her lampshades**?**she has very clear opinions on how she likes them to look?tell us about her character, her heart?

3. Why does Lana love "dream ballets"? How does she use the concept of the dream ballet in her own life, and why does she need to?

4. Some of the chapters actually pair up, with Iris and Lana going through similar rites but with different outcomes and meanings. For example, "Standing Room" and "Aisle Seat" see each woman contemplating her place in a public sphere and hierarchy. What do we learn about Iris and Lana in these two chapters?

5. How do "Honey West" and "Behemoth" interrelate? What do you think of Lana's notion of the "sacred wound"? How many characters might it apply to in this book?

6. Iris thinks she's moving stoically forward. Is she? How aware is she really of the state of her emotions?

7. Lana's father is a judge, and she is a critic. At the same time, Lana prides herself on empathy and understanding. Is there an inherent tension in this? How judgmental is Lana? Is she as fair as she thinks she is?

8. Iris seems to live through symbols and metaphors, deriving solace from "things" ("Objects," she says, "could have a kind of soul"). What does the white blouse in the first chapter mean to her? At what point in the novel do "things" fail her?

9. Is Lana culpable in her own problems with "divas" like Sylvie and Fernanda? What attracts her to these friendships? Could they, should they, have been saved?

10. What is the leap Iris is able to make in "f(light)"? What does making the leap do for her artistically, emotionally?

11. How far has Lana traveled by the time we get to "An Hour of Your Time"? In what ways has she grown or changed?

12. What is Iris looking for in a man? What has she found at the novel's end?

Author Bio

Laura Jacobs is a contributing editor at *Vanity Fair* and is the dance critic for *The New Criterion*. She has written for many other publications, including the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Village Voice*, the *New Republic*, the *Boston Phoenix*, and the *Chicago Reader*.

Critical Praise

"Jacobs writes with intelligence, grace, and an utterly female sensibility."

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