



Book Club Questions

The Sixth by Avery Hays

- 1) In 1910, was it harder or easier than today for a young person to achieve independence and success as an artist?
- 2) Radical politics, artistic creativity, and bohemian lifestyles often go together. Why do you think that is?
- 3) At the beginning of the novel, Florbela is determined to stay clear of her father's political causes and become an artist. Discuss how her character changed throughout the novel. Do you agree with her choices?
- 4) As depicted in this novel, most members of the La Ruche community were concerned mainly with artistic creativity and having a good time. Was this attitude irresponsible? Some of these artists became rich in their lifetimes, others made work that was valuable only after they died, others never sold a single piece. Is the bohemian lifestyle easier to justify, if it leads to valuable works?
- 5) Pablo Picasso was famous as a womanizer and heartbreaker. How did you feel about Irène when she developed her absorbing crush on him? How did your opinion change, when her extreme youth was revealed?
- 6) When Florbela discovered her rival suitors fighting a secret duel, she was furiously angry at them, and never entirely forgave them. Why do you think she felt this way? Do you think this would have been a common way for a young woman of the time to feel, given the circumstances, or was it an unusual quality in Florbela?
- 7) The Holy Inquisition is depicted in this book, as in most modern novels and movies, as a monstrous institution. Yet it was a high office of the Church for many centuries, and it must have seemed like an instrument of good works to most of the people involved. Why has public sentiment changed so strongly?
- 8) Brian Grimm and Fernand Léger eventually end up as close friends. In real life, rivals occasionally become friends, and friends often become rivals. Why do you think that is?
- 9) At several points in the story, Florbela could have given away the dangerous painting to groups who supported the Portuguese rebellion. Why did she insist on carrying the painting to the rebel leaders herself? Do you think this was a good decision?
- 10) Armand was a member of the Souris Trempés, a group of political activists whose cause was only vaguely defined, even among themselves. Do you think he was misguided, in being a member of such a group?

- 11) Irène ran away from a loving home, just because she found her mother's strength overbearing and suffocating. Such conflicts are common between parents and children, though they aren't always so intense. How do these matters usually resolve themselves?
- 12) Florbela turned away two handsome and successful suitors, and chose Armand. What qualities do you think she saw in him that made her love him? What qualities are most important to you in a close friend or intimate acquaintance? Do you feel that Florbela could have chosen better?
- 13) The chaos, poverty and other challenges of life at La Ruche would seem daunting to many people. Do you think would you have enjoyed living at La Ruche in 1910? What would have been the greatest sacrifice of such a life, for you? What would have been the greatest reward?
- 14) Small communities of radicals, artists and bohemians have existed throughout recorded time, and can still be found today. How likely do you think it is that there might be a house full of impoverished young artists somewhere in the world today, whose work will be valued at stratospheric prices a century from now? Where do you think you might find such a house?
- 15) When Florbela was told the secret meaning of the code in the painting, she suddenly found herself in a position where she could do great good for her family and her country, but only at terrible personal risk. How would you feel, if life suddenly threw you into such a position?
- 16) Although Florbela is in many ways a strongly independent woman, she always responds with powerful emotion to her father's praise. How much do you think you are guided in life by your parents' expressions of approval and disapproval?
- 17) Some people would say that Irène Curie's scientific discoveries turned out to be more important than the work of the great artists she knew, even Picasso and Chagall. Do you agree? Why does our society pay hundreds of times more money to artists like Andy Warhol or Jackson Pollock than it pays to scientists like Albert Einstein?

Additional resources are available on the author's website including:

- A map of Paris showing the locations of places mentioned in *The Sixth*
- A letter from Florbela describing what happened to all the characters (fictional and historical)
- An alternate Chapter 34
- Social media links including Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Youtube