



Reading between the Lions

The Art Institute's Book Club

www.artic.edu/bookclub

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas by Gertrude Stein

1. Why is the story told from the perspective of Toklas?
2. To what genre would you assign this book? Is it a biography? If so, of whom?
3. What do you think of Stein's writing style? Do you find it readable? Does it resemble speech?
4. Which characters do you recognize? Who was new to you? Whom did you find the most intriguing? About whom do you want to learn more?
5. Stein always refers to people in one way—she is always “Gertrude Stein,” her brother “Gertrude Stein’s brother” (never “Leo”), and Fernande Picasso simply “Fernande” (never “Picasso’s wife”). Why do you think she chooses these specific and rigid name designations?
6. What kind of gender roles do Stein and Toklas take in their relationship? Do they assume different roles in the company of others?
7. Is the romantic relationship between Stein and Toklas purposely buried or simply presumed unremarkable in the book? Are there relationships between other characters that are similarly left unconfirmed?
8. What were Stein and Toklas's roles in the war? Were you surprised by them?
9. A good deal of attention is paid to the nationality of Stein, Toklas, and others. What does it mean to them to be American? What does it mean to be an American living abroad?
10. What differences did Stein draw between Matisse and Picasso? Do you see those differences reflected in their art?
11. Did you find the book funny?
12. Stein was in her 50s when she wrote this book, which relates stories from her 30s and 40s. How accurate do you think her memories are? How does that affect her style? Does accuracy matter in writing like this?

BONUS QUESTIONS FOR THE EXCEPTIONALLY WELL READ

1. Compare and contrast with Reading between the Lions summer 2009 selection, Katharine Kuh's *My Love Affair with Modern Art*. Which book did you prefer? Whose profiles revealed more about the artists?
2. We almost chose Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* as this season's selection. In it, Hemingway goes to see Stein and Toklas, a meeting that could be one of the scenes related in *Autobiography*. Whose account do you find more credible? Are you surprised by Hemingway's description of Stein and Toklas given Stein's portrayal of Hemingway?

You may also enjoy:

- *A Moveable Feast* by Ernest Hemingway
- *Tender Buttons* by Gertrude Stein
- The exhibition catalogue is also a wonderful resource for more information about Matisse. It is available for purchase in the Museum Shop.