DISCUSSION GUIDE
The Ladies’ Paradise

1. Throughout the book, the department store is likened to a machine. In what ways is this an apt metaphor? Do you feel today’s department stores to still function in this manner?

2. In the opening pages of the novel, Zola uses another metaphor for the department: the chapel. Which do you find more fitting? Is one more applicable for the 19th century? For today? In what ways?

3. Consumer behavior in the novel is largely tracked through the responses of the female characters to what they see in the department store. To what degree did you find these characterizations convincing? Which consumer/character best reflects your own shopping and purchasing impulses?

4. Which business practices detailed in the book are still relevant? Are there present-day parallels to the dynamic of dying individual businesses and the dominant department store?

5. How does the shoplifting incident reflect on the ladies’ paradise and on the de Bove family? How does the store’s response reflect the social values of the time?

6. Which character did you feel the most empathy for? The least? Why? Which was the strongest and most believable character and why?

7. Compare the character of Denise with Zola’s characterization of Woman.

8. Some critics have argued that Denise is a feminist heroine. Do you agree? Why?

Suggested Reading/Watching:
Mr. Selfridge on PBS: www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/programs/series/mr-selfridge/