

Key Porter Reader's Guide  
The Last of the Golden Girls  
By Susan Swan

Version 2  
April 2, 2002

Swan's novel was almost charged with obscenity after a live reading on CBC in 1989. What is it about The Last of the Golden Girls that would prompt such a strong reaction? Do you think it is justified? Would it happen today?

One critic said The Last of the Golden Girls was a welcome relief from stories of the sexual awakenings of boys. Do we see more stories of female sexual coming-of-age stories in popular culture now? Why or why not?

Other critics have said that the novel is a roman a clef about the Eaton family and financier Peter Monk. What other Canadian novels provide a portrait of upper class families? Was does it say about these families?

"Knowing that I was tall and blonde did give me a certain sexual power. I used that power, although quite often it felt like it was using me at the same time." Have you had a similar experience with a power you possess, whether physical beauty or something else? How did you come to terms with it? Do Swan's characters successfully come to terms with their respective powers?

There is cruelty in the human interactions portrayed in both part one and part two of Swan's novel. Is this understandable given the way the sexes thought about each other at that time? Is this a problem we have now?

In both the two cultural time periods covered in the book, Swan posits that the sexes didn't see each other as real people. What incidences in the novel most clearly exemplify this issue? Do you see those incidences recurring today?

In the 1950's and 60's, sexual power was the only power available to women. In comparison, today's characters such as those in the television series Sex in the City have power from other sources. How do these Swan's characters compare with characters in Sex in the City?

Few novels or other forms of popular entertainment have explored the manner in which women objectify men. Why?

Swan has portrayed her woman characters as both prey and predator, especially in the persona of Jude Bell. How does Swan's feminist portrayal relate to women now?

Since the days of Dinger's coming of age, there is more awareness, more information, and more critiquing of gender roles. Has the feminine critique of gender roles over the last forty years had an effect in high schools today?

Jude Bell and her friends are forerunners of the young contemporary women seen in Sex in the City - how is Jude similar and different from Carrie Bradshaw?

Is there still a double standard for women who are sexually active comparative to men?

Do women still use intoxicants other than wine -- power in the form of material goods, money, real estate, politics, careers -- to seduce lovers? What other ammunition do women have now that they may not have had in the 60's?

At 14, Dinger was introduced to a particular environment (sex, drinking, smoking etc) that gave her wisdom beyond her years. How might Jude and her friends' lives been different if they had access to the information and support young girls today receive from sources such as the Internet?

Men and Women

How is the nature of friendship between men and women fundamentally different in The Last of the Golden Girls? Is intimacy among women often more instant? How does its Sapphic intensity expressed in Swan's novel? And how are men used as markers to depict hierarchy and power within the group of female friends?

Women tend to want female approval, which is ultimately more important to them than male approval. Do you agree with this assessment? How else are women friendships different?

Dinger becomes a journalist in the second section of the book which was looked upon as unusual at the time. What is the author saying

about women taking careers in the 1960's and 70's? What factors in our culture have presented themselves in the intervening years that prompts women choosing not to stay home with children? How do you feel about such a fundamental turn-about?

Is *The Last of the Golden Girls* a study in how different classes play themselves out in the landscape? How do middle class families compete with one another at the beach, and the rich on the islands of Georgian Bay? What is Swan trying to say about these competitions?

Swan once said Ontario's middle and upper classes don't know how to relate to the landscape except through sporting competitions. What would be the alternative in creating a relationship to the landscape?

The author feels that the physical land has the potential for bringing spiritual peace and awareness. How can the landscape change a person's awareness? How does the landscape imprint Jude Bell?

In the new epilogue, Dinger is cross-country skiing through the country she re-visits many years after the main events of the book. Swan shows her more at peace with the landscape. What is the author attempting to convey with Dinger's relationship with the landscape in this new epilogue? How is it different from her relationship with the landscape in parts one and two?

How does this novel compare to other Canadian novels in which landscape and weather influence the novelists work?

How is Swan's depiction of social class different in this novel from a novel set in the Canadian prairies? Compare *The Last of the Golden Girls* with Margaret Laurence's *Stone Angel* or Margaret Atwood's *Wilderness Tips*.

When on vacations, many people's inhibitions drop away in some of the same ways as they do with the characters on the island kingdoms of Swan's novel. Why do people act so differently? How does your behavior change when you're traveling or on vacation?

In the 60's, the aspiration was to escape class but seems it is still with us, not through one's parentage but rather through how much money you make. Consequently, it is a myth

that society is class-less - the gaps are wider and more overt than ever. Where do you see yourself in the current social class structure?

Through the act of writing the novel, Swan was able to understand her own position in social class. She is a doctor's daughter, was married to a stock broker, and was hanging out with the wealthy set in the summers. But at the same time she was a writer and a thinker, an intellectual. The dichotomy took almost 30 years for her to resolve, and for her to see herself as a member of a social class, a class she now defines as the intellectual class. Do you believe that defining yourself within a social class is an integral part of your self-definition? Do you believe that one can avoid this type of definition in our current society?

How does Swan satirize the middle and upper class families? How does it compare to Richler's satire about the Jewish families of Montreal in St. Urbin's Horseman?

In this her most autobiographical novel, Swan was obsessed with woman as both conquerors and victims in sexual dynamics. As a writer, has she successfully translated her own obsession to the character of Jude Bell? Is it plausible for the character?

Some critics objected to the cataclysmic ending - why did Swan need to finish the novel with an end of the world scenario? Is it a hallucination or did it really happen? How does the new Epilogue amplify this?

The author did not originally intend the novel to end after part two. Her first storyline was to include a third section where the characters are seen at a later stage in their lives. Where would the characters be in your part three, and what would they be doing now?

"I'd like to be remembered for creating powerful female characters who have the mythic force to endure and represent new ways of being female in the world," states Swan. Has she been successful in her aim with The Last of the Golden Girls?

If you were serving dinner during a reading of The Last of the Golden Girls:

- Part One - Shopsy's hot dogs, Orange Crush, Molson's, roasted marshmallows tinted in shades

of pink, yellow and blue.

- Part Two - Dom Perignon champagne, ten bottles of Pinot Gris '69 Neuchatel chilled in ice buckets, dolmades (rice stuffed grape leaves), stinking bishop cheese, BBQ lamp chops with homemade mint sauce and fresh shelled peas, new baby Ontario potatoes, fried bananas with ice cream topped with Kahlua followed by de Montal Armagnac and Spanish Coffee.