

Reading Group Questions

1. Both Helena and Elizabeth dealt in the illusion of youth and beauty, but both were pretending to be something they were not. Both worried about how things appeared to the outside world. Did they really care about helping women to look their best, or was it all about money and power and outdoing each other?
2. Would Helena and Elizabeth have been as successful as they were had it not been for their intense rivalry? Can you think of other examples of rivals spurring each other on? For example, some say the Beatles owed their huge success to the rivalry between John Lennon and Paul McCartney.
3. Antisemitism was common in the period the novel covers (1915–46). Should Helena have changed her name when she launched her first American salon? Why do you think she didn't? Was her Jewishness more important to her than she admitted?
4. Did you find it hard to sympathise with Elizabeth, or were there moments when you felt sorry for her despite her faults? How much was her tough childhood responsible for making her the woman she became?
5. If Helena put business before family, she was only emulating what successful men had been doing all along. Why do you think it was easier for her to be a businesswoman than a mother or wife?
6. Elizabeth's sexuality remains opaque and she clearly didn't have very good gaydar. Why do you think she never managed to have a fulfilling romantic life?
7. Helena handed out dollar bills to the homeless during the Great Depression but got her doorman to move beggars from outside the salon so they didn't disturb her clients. Should she have done more?
8. Elizabeth was not an especially political person, and her sympathy for fascism in the 1930s was shared by many of her contemporaries. However, she crossed a line when she compared Gladys's experience in a Nazi camp to that of Helena's sister Regina. In this era when there are still Holocaust deniers trying to negate the established facts of the Nazi genocide of Jews, it is crucial that novelists don't let their characters get away with any watering down of the full horror. In *A Beautiful Rival*, Laney chastises Elizabeth. What did you think of Elizabeth's views? Was she ignorant or bigoted or both?
9. How do you feel about the modern beauty industry, with their promises of eternal youth if you buy the newest products with the most scientific ingredients? Are you ever persuaded by adverts to try a new miracle cream or serum?
10. Could Helena and Elizabeth ever have been friends?