

Layla Discussion Guide

INTRODUCTION

Layla was inspired in part by a profile in the *New Yorker* about Katherine Ann Power, an antiwar activist, who became a fugitive and lived a secret life under the radar. In 2003, when Kathy Boudin, a member of the radical Weather Underground, was released from prison, there was a massive public reaction. Is it surprising that their crimes were committed decades ago, but still inspire such a fiery response? Author Céline Keating has remained involved in politics since the '60s. It was these news stories that planted the seed of a novel, but perhaps more influential was the question her friend posed after hearing about an argument between Céline and her mother: How would you feel if you had a daughter with ultraconservative political views? This question evolved in Céline's mind to many questions. How does the generation who experienced the '60s firsthand see that period of time now? And how do subsequent generations view those years? Does the legacy of the '60s still resonate today, especially looking back at the Occupy Wall Street movement and the current political climate? The novel *Layla* is a rich and complex response to these broad questions as well as a story about a mother and a daughter, a family brought together and torn apart by politics, and ultimately about the way we develop our personal moral compass.

QUESTIONS

1. Layla has been told her whole life by her mother, Audrey that the '60s was a time like no other, steeped with change and meaning; when life had purpose and people—ordinary people—could make a difference. In the beginning, Layla doesn't want any part of this world. In fact she vigorously resists it. How did she develop this attitude and when does it begin to change? Why are her feelings about the era so different than Trent's, who was also raised by activist parents?
2. On her deathbed, Layla's mother begs her to take a cross-country road trip they planned before she fell ill. As a result, Layla must begin a quest that she was reluctant to take in the first place, and which is even harder to do on her own while grieving the loss of her mother. How does her interaction with her mother's friends help her through her grief? Or not? What does each visit teach her?
3. Mystery writer, Con Lehane calls Layla "a fast-moving story of family secrets, political intrigue, and a young woman's coming of age." Audrey's letters—the "instructions" for each leg of the road trip—reveal the family's secrets layer by layer, which culminates in a surprising and moving conclusion. How does this technique propel the novel forward and, at the same time, deepen Layla's experiences?
4. "I learned that there is a rhythm to driving long distances, a rhythm and a mood, and I felt a strange sadness as I passed the outskirts of towns and cities I never stopped to see, at the sameness of the McDonalds and the Mobil gas stations that fool you into thinking you've seen everything, story of family secrets, political intrigue, and a young woman's coming of age." Audrey's letters—the "instructions" for each leg of the road trip—reveal the family's secrets layer by layer, which culminates in a surprising and moving conclusion. How does this technique propel the novel forward and, at the same time, deepen Layla's experiences?
5. It could be said that the community of friends who support Layla's mother and father are linked by politics as much as by friendship. In fact, her father barely knows many of the people who go to great lengths to protect him over the years. Layla's mother often said, "politics is personal." What does she mean by that?

6. Layla is a budding photographer, and in many ways finds it easier to see the world through a lens. Why is that? Does it change over the course of the novel?
7. Layla finds comfort in Nancy Drew novels. She loved them as a child, but at one of the stops on her journey, she discovers them again and devours four or five in one sitting. What does Layla find in these novels? How do they comfort her?
8. Layla comes face to face with her past in the California desert—a place as far away as possible from her New York City home—and must come to terms with her own morality. How important is the setting for this life-changing moment in Layla’s life?
9. Layla’s father was understandably obsessed with staying hidden and lived every moment with the fear of being caught. How did that affect him over time? Do you think going “underground” was the right thing for him to do? Do you think his self-imposed isolation was as punishing as prison?
10. Music plays a major role in the novel, and acts as a soundtrack to Layla’s life. Throughout her trip she hears ’60s music that initially makes her cringe. Ultimately she adopts these songs as they gain more and more meaning in her life. What kind of soundtrack would be appropriate in your life? In what ways does it change as you age?
11. Who do you identify most with: Layla or Audrey? Do you agree or disagree with their choices? Do you feel that Layla changed at a fundamental level by the end of the novel?
12. It’s said that “just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they aren’t after you” and Layla learns this the hard way. How does her perception of her parents’ past change in light of this new understanding? How does it affect her relationship with Trent? Were you surprised to learn who betrayed her secrets?
13. Does the legacy of the ’60s still resonate today? Do you think history will repeat itself and that another cultural revolution is in our future?