

THE LITTLE FRENCH BRIDAL SHOP

— READING GUIDE —

1. Larisa is so afraid to face the dementia that has taken hold of her mother that she engages in a series of deceptions, an escapism of sorts. Have you ever experienced anything similar in your own life, something you took great lengths to avoid? Did you engage in elaborate deception? If so, did you eventually come clean or not, and why?
2. The novel takes place in an insular small town, one that allows the rumors to spread quickly. Before long, the rumors become a truth of sorts. How would the story have differed if it had taken place in a big city? Would Larisa's lies have had the same impact? Would Larisa have come clean with them in the end?
3. Aunt Ursula is already gone in the opening pages of the novel, yet her aura is present throughout the narrative. How does the aura of Aunt Ursula empower Larisa? Are there ways in which her aura is stifling to Larisa? Do you have an Aunt Ursula in your life?
4. Elmhurst, the house that Aunt Ursula leaves behind, is like a character in the book. Larisa and Jack tear down the walls, write their names on them, and then build the walls back up again. Discuss the ways in which the demolition and renovation of the house reflect Larisa's transformation over the course of the novel.
5. Jack struggles with both his waning feelings for Holly and his growing feelings toward Larisa. He feels bound (and dutiful) to Holly because of their marriage vows and their three kids, but his heart just isn't in the marriage anymore. In contrast, he feels a chemistry between him and Larisa that makes him wonder why he can't have that same synergy with his wife. Do you believe that certain people just have natural chemistry between them? Can commitment and a desire to "make things work" make up for a lack of chemistry or does a relationship need the latter to withstand the test of time?
6. Aunt Ursula and Andy never married in part because the timing wasn't right. Larisa and Jack knew each other when they were younger but didn't have romantic feelings for each other until Larisa returned to Kent's Crossing to take control of Elmhurst. Do you believe that timing plays a part in love and romance? By the end of the novel, when the night-blooming cereus is about to bloom, is the time finally right for Larisa and Jack?

7. In the beginning of the novel, Larisa engages in a series of deceptions as a way of avoiding her life. In the end, she improvises her interactions with her mother and engages in pretend scenarios to calm her mother's agitated state. Her father does this as well. These interactions could be characterized as a different kind of deception. Are there times at which it is okay to engage in white lies and harmless deception?
8. Loss, unfortunately, is an inevitable part of life. Dementia is particularly devastating in that although the sufferer is still alive, she is unable to function and interact as she once could. Both the sufferer and the friends/caretakers/family members of the sufferer feel this impact deeply and repeatedly, often for many years as the disease progresses. Over the course of the novel, Larisa must learn new ways in which to interact with her mother. Have you had to adapt your modes of interaction with a loved one? Did you learn or recognize something about yourself as a result? Might you apply any of these new techniques to other relationships with non-ailing loved ones?
9. Larisa repeatedly refers to one of the "Twenty-Five Keys to a Successful Marriage": everyone is hard to live with. What "key" do you attribute to your successful relationship? Or, when you've experienced an unsuccessful relationship, was there some "key" ingredient that was missing? Did you realize it at the time or only in hindsight?
10. This novel has many repeated phrases throughout. Discuss how the meaning and resonance of each of them changes as the novel progresses.
 - *Rosa Rugosa? There's no Rosa Rugosa here.*
 - *What would Aunt Ursula say?*
 - *Everyone is hard to live with.*
 - *Larisa Pearl is getting married.*

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