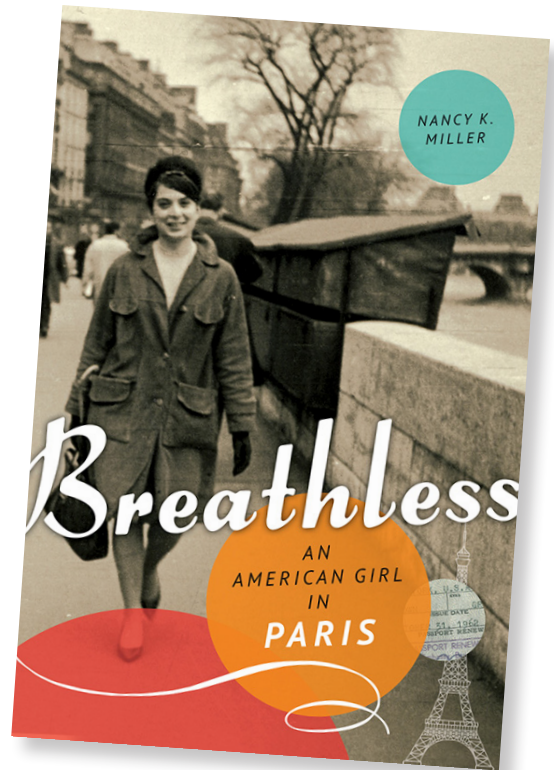


Discussion Questions

Breathless: An American Girl in Paris

by Nancy K. Miller

- 1 Consider the title of the memoir, *Breathless: An American Girl in Paris*. *Breathless* is also the title of Jean-Luc Godard's 1960 *nouvelle vague* movie, starring Jean-Paul Belmondo and Jean Seberg. In what ways was this movie important to Nancy even before she left New York to live in Paris? Why was Jean Seberg's signature haircut so important to Nancy? Why do you think the author chose to echo the movie in the title of her book?
- 2 What vision of Paris in the 1960s did you have before you read the memoir? What personal experiences, books, movies, or songs contributed to your vision of Paris?
- 3 In the chapter "Waiting for Godard," the author explains how she was driven to live abroad, in part, by fear: "France was my hedge against the Marjorie Morningstar destiny that haunted American girls in the 1950s: marriage to a successful man and then the suburbs with children" (8). Do you think twenty-first century American girls and women still share that fear of a conventional life? Why or why not?
- 4 How much did Nancy's desire to live in Europe have to do with leaving home, and how much with her fantasies about Paris? What do you think about the deal her parents struck with her, that she would have to write them a weekly letter in turn for their funding her trip? (8) Do you think the letter-writing contract was a burden, or does the letters' usefulness to the writer today make the deal worth it?
- 5 How did French people, especially French men, view American girls in the 1960s? How did American girls view French men? Consider how bewildered Nancy felt right after sleeping with her parents' friend Philippe: "'Do it myself? Is that something French?'" (4) How else might she have handled that awkward moment?
- 6 Why do you think this American girl sought out new sexual experiences? What did she hope would come from them? What did? Did Nancy seem brave to you, or hopelessly naïve? When the tutor put his hand down her blouse, she wondered: "What was worse, saying no or saying yes?" (16) What do you think of her solution to the dilemma?



- 7 After her father learned that Nancy has been living with Bernard in a bad neighborhood, he wrote in a letter, “I will quit moralizing if you can get me a single expression of approval from any father of any nationality whatever who will condone in his daughter what you are doing in Paris.” (61). What do you think about the parents’ reactions to their daughter’s adventures? How did they affect her subsequent behavior? How might you have reacted if this girl were your daughter? Or if your parents treated you this way?
- 8 Over the course of their relationship, Nancy became obsessed with domestic activities, including washing and sorting Jim’s many pairs of almost identical black socks. “I think I knew,” the author writes, “the socks were not a text” (119). Why do you think Nancy married Jim? What meaning did these acts of domesticity have for her? Do you find Jim sympathetic? Why or why not?
- 9 Consider the scene in which Nancy tried, unsuccessfully, to create a perfect meal for Jim and his friends: “That night, while the men were having drinks and olives in the living room, I bent over the stove watching for a positive sign. No matter what I did, the turnips just lay there, staring back at me, stubbornly pale and resistant” (117). Why was Nancy so determined to learn how to cook? Why do you think the author presents the cooking episodes with a comic twist? Do you remember your first cooking fiasco?
- 10 Consider the scenes that led to Jim and Nancy’s break-up, including the affair with the carpenter and the car crash. What do you think caused the marriage to fail? Was it the affair or something else? What has changed in our expectations of marriage since the 1960s?
- 11 Were you relieved or disappointed when, after six years in Paris, Nancy decided to return to New York? What other options did she have? Consider this line from the prologue: “In the end, I had to leave Paris, if I wanted to be free.” (vi) What did freedom mean to Nancy in her twenties?
- 12 “I never got over Paris. In the beginning, the pain of separation was acute, but in the end I’ve found a way to make a story out of it” (v). What does it mean to “get over” a city? Is there a particular place you’ve never gotten over? Explain your answer.