



How Sweet It Is!

Thane Rosenbaum

1972
Miami Beach

Readers' Discussion Questions HOW SWEET IT IS! A Novel By Thane Rosenbaum

1. Explain how Miami Beach in 1972 was a transformational year for both the city itself and the members of the Posner family. Does it appear from the novel that the city was even aware of these changes at the time? How has Miami changed since 1972?
2. Each member of the Posner family experiences Miami Beach differently. Discuss Sophie's, Jacob's, and Adam's experiences in relationship to the city.
3. The novel is constructed of interlocking short stories. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story this way? Did it make a difference in the way you read or understood the novel? What are the advantages/disadvantages of telling a story in this fashion?
4. Similarly, the stories do not seem to unfold in chronological order, and in some cases they conflict with each other. What does that say about the use of time as a plot device in telling a story?
5. What specific themes did the author emphasize throughout the novel? What message do you think he or she is trying to get across to the reader? Does the introduction of historical characters enhance those themes, or distract from them, in any way?
6. In a review of the novel in *The Times of Israel* the reviewer writes that the author believes "if the holocaust is as 'unspeakable' and 'unimaginable' as people say it is, writers should not try to normalize it." What do you think this quote means and how did Rosenbaum express this sentiment in his novel? Does the use of humor, and absurdity, help in making this point?
7. There are many historical characters that make an appearance in this novel: Meyer Lansky, Jackie Gleason, Frank Sinatra, Mohammad Ali, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and even Fidel Castro. Who is your favorite and why?
8. Because this is a novel of historical fiction, does it matter to you in any way that the use of these characters, in this setting and context, is completely fictional? Do you feel that fiction writers should be able to use famous people in this way?
9. The counterculture plays a big part in the novel. Is there any irony in having hippies and anti-war protesters descend on Miami Beach?
10. Crime plays a role in the novel—the Jewish Mafia, the Watergate plumbers, the drug-addled hippies using Central Park as a refuge, the murder of the Israeli athletes in the 1972 Munich Olympics. How do the Posners react to such activities, and does that have anything to do with why Sophie rises to become the consigliere of Lansky's crime syndicate?
11. Jackie Gleason, Meyer Lansky, and Frank Sinatra are drawn to Sophie— emotionally and perhaps even romantically. Why, in particular, would this trio develop feelings for a damaged but resourceful Holocaust survivor?
12. There is irony in Rabbi Sheldon Vered's friendship with Muhammad Ali. What is that irony, and how can it be explained in the context of this novel?

13. *How Sweet It Is!* is, in many ways, a novel about second chances. Identify to whom these second chances apply? Do any of the characters succeed in actually taking advantage of their second chance?

14. Back in 1972 Meyer Lansky believed that only legalized gambling could save Miami Beach from its decrepit hotels, aged population, and general decline. It took several decades, but Miami Beach not only came back, but it has succeeded far beyond what Lansky could have ever imagined. How did it do that, without even having to rely on legalized gambling? 15. Fidel Castro seems to make a cameo appearance in *How Sweet It Is!* Of all the historical characters in the novel, only he, Muhammad Ali, and Don Shula are still alive. Now that the United States is normalizing its relationship with Cuba, isn't it amazing the way the cold war played itself out in Miami Beach? Miami Beach and Cuba are both islands in the tropics. What else did they have in common, other than Meyer Lansky once running a criminal empire in each location?