The Tobacco Wives

by Adele Myers

1. The women of Bright Leaf seem to have it all. However, as Maddie becomes drawn into their world, she suspects that their lives may not be as perfect as they appear to be. How did Maddie’s opinion of the women shift throughout the summer? Have you experienced situations in which someone appeared to “have it all” but really didn’t?

2. Maddie is determined to take care of herself, insisting that she has no interest in boys or marriage. Why does she feel so strongly about this? Why do you think she changes her mind after David comes into her life?

3. Why do you think that Mitzy took such an immediate interest in Maddie? Do you feel that Mitzy is a positive mother-figure for Maddie?

4. What were some of the opportunities created as a result of women taking over men’s jobs at Bright Leaf Tobacco? What were the challenges?

5. How did Cornelia’s books impact Maddie’s choices that summer? Why do you think that Cornelia gave Maddie those particular books? What was the most influential book you have read?

6. Before the dangers of smoking were known, communities like Bright Leaf were immensely proud of their towns and industry. Why do you think it was difficult for these communities to stop supporting the tobacco industry?

7. Tobacco executives like Mr. Winston and medical professionals like Dr. Hale began to learn about the dangers of smoking in the 1950s and 1960s, yet many continued to sell and support the industry. Do you think they really believed that smoking was safe, or did they know the dangers and look the other way?

8. Tobacco companies were among the first to use advertising to deliberately deceive the public. Tobacco advertising on television and radio was banned in 1970, and additional restrictions have been placed on the industry over the years. Do you think these restrictions made a difference on public perceptions of smoking? Should advertising be banned or restricted in other industries?

9. Several male characters suggest that work is harmful to pregnant women. Dr. Hale goes so far as to blame working for the increase in premature births. How have misconceptions surrounding pregnancy shifted over the decades? Do you feel that pregnant women still face difficulties in the workplace?

10. What did you think Mitzy would say when she interrupted Mr. Winston during his Gala speech? Do you agree with her decision?