



Goodbye Without Leaving

By Laurie Colwin
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Somewhere in the middle of *Goodbye Without Leaving* -- Laurie Colwin's witty, affecting story of a young woman's struggle to make her own way in the world -- a character named Wah says, "We are constantly living the history of our own lives, you dig? You used to be your old self, now you're a new self, and someday you'll be some other self and what's now will be your old self." The confusion of this train of thought aside, Wah's analysis is fairly apt. We are constantly changing, shedding selves like onion skins. What we may have missed, however, and what Colwin's heroine, Geraldine Coleshares, comes to realize, is that the shedding of those skins is the essence of life.

Throughout the novel, Geraldine moves from life to life: touring as a back-up singer for a rhythm and blues band; dabbling in different non-profit jobs relating to music; marrying a lawyer and having a child. As each stage of her life presents different challenges, Geraldine struggles to imprint herself on the choices she has made. And each phase of her life -- from her nights on stage in a slinky dress to her days at home with her young son -- brings its revelations: about the value of pursuing one's dreams no matter how unconventional they may be; about how love and support can come from the most unexpected sources; and about the cultural and spiritual value of one's own roots. Finally, and most significantly, she learns that each stage of life brings its own blessings and surprises. The key is recognizing them, reveling in them, and sharing them with others. As Geraldine says goodbye to her youth and her recklessness, she learns to say hello to her family, her talents, and her future.

Questions for Discussion

1. Geraldine is continually thrusting herself into the company of people whose experiences and backgrounds are vastly different from her own: a rhythm and blues band, a Harlem-based music foundation, and a society of elderly European refugees. Why do you think she pursues these acquaintances? What does she learn from her friendships with these people?
2. Gertje Regenstein, one of Geraldine's German employers at the Hanson Society, believes that "to be an American was to be blessed with a kind of idiotic but very useful innocence." Do you agree with this statement? How is innocence useful? And how does this statement apply to the way Geraldine has lived her life so far? In what ways is she idiotic or innocent?
3. Geraldine revels in her life as a back-up singer for a rhythm-and-blues group, but is hesitant, years later, to sing or dance in public. Why do you think she refuses to show off her obvious talents? And why, ultimately, does she decide that she will sing -- at her friend's funeral, at home with her son and husband, and at Franklin's school? What do singing, swimming, and learning Hebrew -- all activities that Geraldine embarks on toward the end of the novel -- have in common?
4. By the end of the novel, Geraldine has established a settled life: a marriage, a child, a job. As a young woman, she likely would have scoffed at this kind of life. How does Geraldine make her life her own? What challenges still lie ahead for her? As a group, discuss how each of you has made life choices-good or bad-that reflect who you are.
5. The novel's epigraph reads: "Americans leave without saying goodbye/Refugees say goodbye without leaving." What do you think this means? Is Geraldine a refugee or an American? What does the epigraph have to do with the novel?

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