



## The Ladies' Lending Library

By Janice Kulyk Keefer  
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### Introduction

In the summer of 1963, the year of the release of the film epic *Cleopatra*, the women of Kalyna Beach prepare for their annual end-of season party. With their husbands away in the city all week, the women's days are ruled by the predictable rhythms of children and chores, lightened by the "racy" books they share and by their Friday afternoon gatherings for gin and gossip, heightened by their obsession with the deliciously scandalous love affair between Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton.

Their insular world of first-generation Ukrainian Canadians is straining with its own dramas and secrets. Sonia, a former model, mourns the death of her mother. Elusive Nadia, the wife of a millionaire, longs for a life she cannot have. Sophisticated Sasha plays a dangerous game in both challenging and shoring-up the traditions and values of their seaside community. And for their daughters, the rifts and fissures that appear in the once impregnable "world of the mothers" will unleash a startling series of

betrayals and discoveries.

### Questions for Discussion

1. What does the reaction of the members of the Ladies' Lending Library to the film, *Cleopatra*, and the much-publicized extramarital affair between Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton reveal about the condition of their own marriages?
2. Why does Darka's presence at the Martyn cottage threaten so many of the wives of Kalyna Beach, and how does her presence affect the husbands?
3. How does Laura's obsession with the figure of Cleopatra relate to her own adolescent anxieties?
4. What does Chucha Marta's behavior toward Bonnie reveal about her strengths and weaknesses? To what extent is her portrayal by the author sympathetic?
5. Why does the summer idyll of Kalyna Beach serve as a domestic nightmare for the many spouses who spend their weeks apart and their weekends together?
6. Why do so many ghosts and memories from Ukraine, "the Old Place," pervade the community in *The Ladies' Lending Library*, and how do they affect your appreciation of the issues these characters face as first- and second-generation immigrants?
7. How does the discovery of Mrs. Shkurka's brutal treatment of her daughter, Anastasia, bring Laura and Sonia closer, and why is that closeness only temporary?
8. How is the seaside setting—with its implicit embrace of physicality and liberation— responsible for the overtly sexual nature of many of the incidents in which the inhabitants of Kalyna Beach find themselves?
9. To what extent does Sasha's fear that Peter Metelsky's relationship with Nadia Senchenko will cause the web of relationships of Kalyna Beach residents to unravel seem likely?
10. How are the themes of sexual desire and longing, wish-fulfillment, and self-denial significant to the plot of *The Ladies' Lending Library*?

### About the Author

Janice Kulyk Keefer is the author of *Thieves, Honey and Ashes*, *The Green Library* (nominated for a Governor General's Award), *The Paris-Napoli Express*, *Constellations*, *Under Eastern Eyes* (also nominated for a Governor General's Award), *Reading Mavis Gallant*, *Travelling Ladies* and *Res Harrow*. She is a recipient of the Marian Engel Award, the Canadian Authors Association Award for Poetry, two prizes from the CBC Radio Literary Competition and several National Magazine Awards. She lives in Toronto.