

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE by Virginia Woolf

- Woolf explores the ways in which people perceive or come to know the world: through intellect and facts or through intuition and feelings. Talk about how the different characters fall into those categories, especially Mrs. Ramsey and Mr. Ramsey; Charles Tansley and Lilly Briscoe. Where do you fall along these lines?
- Mrs. Ramsey desires unity in her life over fragmentation. How does she express this desire. (Think about her knitting....) At her dinner party that evening, the guests are fractious, their individual desires keeping them separate. How, eventually, does the gathering finally achieve coherence and peace?
- There is also a desire for permanence, for things to be "immune from change." How is this expressed in the book? Think of what Mrs. Ramsey wishes for, think of bowl of fruit on the dining table, the sea eating away at the land, the night air floating through the house, the change of seasons, Mr. Ramsey's wish for his books, and so on. (Remember that *To the Lighthouse* was written after World War I, so that author and her readers, even back then, were aware of the horrific change that would take place 4 years after the events in this book. Does that knowledge create a sense of fate...or doom?)
- What do you think of Mr. Ramsey? Mrs. Ramsey? Why can't or won't Mrs. Ramsey tell her husband she loves him?
- James yearns to visit the lighthouse—and his parents respond differently to his desiring something so specific. How do they respond...and what do their responses say about them?
- Ten years later, James sees his lighthouse, but it's not the same. He wonders which vision is the correct one and realizes both are correct. How can that be? What conclusion does he reach?
- Lily's painting is an attempt to fix the flux of time onto a canvas, to offer a sort of restoration of what is lost through time. How does that play out in this work? Consider memory, as well. Lily, like Mr. Ramsay and his books, is insecure about her painting. How does that change at the end? Why does the book end with Lily and her painting?
- How do gender roles evidence themselves in this work? How, for instance, does Mrs. Ramsay, in particular, view women's roles vis-a-vis men?



Skokie Public Library

5215 Oakton Street
Skokie, Illinois 60077
847.673.7774 / 847.673.7797 fax
www.skokielifrary.info

Skokie Public Library Trustees: John Graham, President;
Diana Hunter, Vice President/President Emerita; Zelda Rich, Secretary;
Susan Greer; Eva Weiner; John M. Wozniak; Dayle Zelenka

Director: Carolyn A. Anthony