

FIREWORKS OVER TOCCOA

Jeffrey Stepakoff

Discussion Questions

1. At eighty-two, Lily lived entirely alone in her big Victorian house. More than lonely, Lily often felt “an exquisite bittersweetness.” What do you think the author means by this?
2. When Lily sees the fireworks for the first time, it moves her, stirring deep-seated emotions. Though it was gone from sight, it remained engraved in her memory. Were you surprised that Lily was so affected by these fireworks? Have you ever been emotionally effected by an art form in this kind of way?
3. What was your response to Lily’s decision to offer a thirsty African-American soldier a rare ice cold Coca-Cola in the middle of busy downtown 1945 Toccoa, Georgia? Do you think she should have been more direct in her action to help him, or stayed out of it entirely?
4. Married at seventeen only two weeks before her husband left for war, Lily meets and falls for Jake after her husband has been gone for three and a half years. Do you think it was wrong for Lily to accept Jake’s invitation to dinner in the field? What was your response to her feelings for Jake and decision to begin an affair with him?
5. After Jake saw Lorena step on a landmine in Italy, he believes that events in life are arbitrary, that “life and death... it’s a matter of a breath, a heartbeat... a single footstep.” Do you believe that things happen due to “the simple timing of things,” as Jake does? Or do you, like Lily, believe that things happen for a reason?
6. Honey speaks the name of her son, Jonathan, only once in the story after he is killed in the war. Do you think the way she deals with his death is understandable? Do you think it’s healthy? What effect do you think it has on Lily?
7. Lily was surprised to learn that Mark – who once “drew her in charcoal while she lay drying in the sun in her underwear” – left Toccoa mainly to get away from her? What did you think about Lily’s revelation that Mark felt this way about her? Do you think Lily has changed significantly since her days as a Toccoa teenager?
8. Despite his father’s words of wisdom, that “war is a dark fever, love its tonic” and despite his promise to his father to always leave his “heart open,” Jake is unable to shake from his soul what he saw when he liberated Dachau: “In tattered wool pajamas, faded stripes, they peered out at him. Eyes in black sockets, in sunken bobbling skulls, reflecting the unimaginable unspeakable horrors of the boneyards and furnaces behind them.” Do you think a person can ever fully recover after seeing what Jake saw?

9. Lily's father Walter is very clear with her about what he expects her to do when he speaks to her the morning after she has been out all night with Jake. What was your response to how Walter handled this situation? In his place, in what ways would you have reacted similarly or differently?

10. Do you think duty is ever more important than love?

11. Were you surprised by what happened to Paul on his way home? How do you think this event resonates with the theme of arbitrary occurrences vs. destiny?

12. What do you think about Lily not going to Jake before leaving on the train for Washington? What would you have done?

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