

Discussion Questions for *Loving Eleanor*.

I have included quite a few questions here. For your group's discussion, choose those you think are most likely to engage them.—*Susan Wittig Albert*

- 1 In this fictional memoir, one of the recurring themes is whether and how the story will be told--and by whom. Why is this question especially important to *this* particular story? In today's media-dominated and social-media world, could Lorena's and Eleanor's story remain a secret?
- 2 If Lorena Hickok had not saved the letters and donated them to the FDR Library, what do you think would have happened to them? How would this have affected our knowledge of and understanding about ER's and Hick's relationship?
- 3 Hick and ER are attracted to one another in the beginning because each fills a compelling need in the other. What are those needs? How do they change over the course of the women's lives? How does each woman adapt to these changes?
- 4 Have you experienced a long-term friendship? Has it changed over the years or stayed the same? If it has changed, in what ways? Why?
- 5 Hick's and ER's relationship begins during the pressure of a presidential campaign and continues through the darkness of the Depression and the frantic worries of World War II. In what ways does this political and historical context shape their friendship? How does it bring them closer? Pull them apart?
- 6 As children, both ER and Hick experienced loss and sadness. How did these experiences shape their lives? In Eleanor's era and in her social class parents had minimal physical contact with their children. How does this seem to affect her?
- 7 Hick says that as a reporter, she had internalized the cardinal AP rule: "Report what you see, not how you feel. *Do not* get involved. It's not your story, it's his, or hers, or theirs. Don't become part of what you're seeing." An important part of her growth comes when she begins to violate that rule, with ER, Cora, and the other people she meets on her tour of Depression-era America. In what ways does this change her?
- 8 Hick has a great deal of difficulty dealing with ER's growing celebrity--and her attitude about it. But Hick herself has to share some of the responsibility for creating ER's fame. Do you think Hick sees that irony?
- 9 After the California trip, Hick chooses to pull away from ER rather than allow herself to be caught in her friend's media spotlight. Indeed, at this time in their friendship, both women may have been employing a kind of emotional blackmail. Have you experienced a relationship in which there has been manipulation? How did it affect you?
- 10 Hick's need for privacy becomes a ruling passion in her life. ER, on the other hand, doesn't seem to have the same need for privacy—in fact, she almost seems to want to be "outed." How does this conflict shape the relationship?

- 11 In Chapter 8, Louis Howe warns Hick not to get too close to ER. How would Hick's life have been different if she had taken Louis' advice?
- 12 In Chapter 4, ER tells Hick that she, her children, and Missy LeHand are all caught in FDR's orbit and can't escape. In different ways, Hick and Tommy become caught in ER's orbit. What is there about these two Roosevelts that creates this kind of magnetic attraction?
- 13 To Hick, FDR seems to wield a devious "left hook." What examples of his deviousness and deception did you find in the novel? How (in the novel) do his manipulations change ER's life? Hick's life? In what ways does ER manipulate FDR to do things that she wants done?
- 14 From her early thirties, Hick has to deal with diabetes, a disease that (at the time) was just beginning to be understood. At what points in her life does this illness most seriously affect her? How does it shape what she wants to do? What she is able to do?
- 15 The title of this book is *Loving Eleanor*. We may think at first that it is the story of Hick's love for Eleanor. But who else loves this woman? What happens to the people who love her?
- 16 ER herself loves many people over the course of this book: FDR, Hick, Earl Miller, Joe Lash. What roles do these people play in her life?
- 17 The Eleanor Roosevelt we meet through Hick's eyes may be different from the way we have learned, through the media, to see her. What new understanding of ER did you gain from this book? What do you see as her most important character strengths? Her greatest vulnerabilities?
- 18 Journalism professor Maurine Beasley calls ER a "transformative First Lady," suggesting that she forever changed the parameters of the First Lady's position. Do you agree? Why? Why not?
- 19 The relationship of ER and Lorena Hickok has been described in various ways, and the question of whether it was sexual, erotic, romantic, or friendly has been much discussed by historians, biographers, critics, and even filmmakers (witness Ken Burns' *The Roosevelts*). Does Hick's telling of the story satisfy your interest in this aspect of the relationship? Why? Why not?
- 20 If you could ask Hick a question, what would it be? Why do you feel it is important?
- 21 If you could ask the author a question, what would it be? Why do you feel it is important?