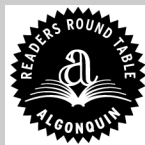


Responsible Men

A Short Note from the Author

• • •

A Reading and Discussion Guide



Life of a Salesman

A Short Note from the Author

MY FATHER IS a salesman, my grandfather was a salesman, and my great-grandfather was a salesman. So, growing up, I felt bound to become a salesman myself.

Like Caleb and Abe Wolinsky in my novel, my father works as a manufacturer's representative, a middleman, selling textiles for various mills. He sells to companies that make clothes. He works on commission — usually 1 or 2 percent — with no guaranteed salary and no benefits. My grandfather started the business in 1926. My father followed in his footsteps and they shared a small office for close to sixty years. For the last twenty-two years, my father has had the office to himself. These days, he doesn't travel as much as he used to, but he's still often on the road, visiting old clients.

When I was around ten years old, my father occasionally took me on the road with him. Maybe there were a half-dozen trips, maybe there were more, but the morning rituals were always the same. When my father finished shaving, he woke me up, the sharp smell of his aftershave filling my room. He'd tell me to hurry, to be quiet, and I'd hustle to get ready. I was wearing small leisure suits back then, eating bowls of sugary cereal for breakfast. We slipped out of the house in the dark and I couldn't wait to climb into the front seat of the car. I was the copilot for those trips.

My father's business cars were a world unto themselves, a world in which he seemed to live at least half his life. There was

a silver Plymouth Sport Fury that didn't last long, a brown Datsun 280Z 2+2, but most of the time he was behind the wheel of a Chrysler New Yorker, an enormous sedan that rode like a luxury liner.

My father kept everything he needed within easy reach. He had a razor he could plug into the cigarette lighter. There were mints and No-Doz pills, sunglasses, leather driving gloves that snapped around his wrists. I can remember the eight-track tapes (Beethoven, Glenn Miller, the Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel).

Despite the salesman stereotype, my father's never been much of a talker, at home or at work. We were quiet when we left the house and we stayed quiet in the car. I could have drifted off to sleep, but I wanted to stay awake. I stared out the big windshield, hoping to see something that would give me an excuse to break the silence—an exotic license plate, a low-flying plane. I was a little kid and I wasn't going to make a sale or close a big order, but I could still feel the possibility of the day before us as the sun rose.

Everywhere we stopped, people were happy to see my father and me. Secretaries offered me doughnuts and apple juice. Someone else gave me a velour shirt and told me the kids at school would be jealous. A few people took me on tours, leading me through rooms with endless rows of men and women at sewing machines, the sound of their hard work almost deafening.

In factory after factory, people joked with me, telling me that I looked like a smart little businessman. Then, one day, outside a conference room in Baltimore, a buyer put his hand on my shoulder. He had jeweled rings on a few of his fingers. "Some-day you'll be taking over for your father," he said. "Do you think you'll be as good a salesman as he is?"

"I think I will," I said. "I'll try."

"I'm glad to hear it," the buyer said. "But you need to remember that it takes a lot of work to close a deal."

My father didn't say anything right away, but I could tell from the way he shut his briefcase that he was angry. He was still angry when he tossed the briefcase into the car and slammed the trunk. Inside the car, he started to calm down. "I want you to understand something," he said, looking over at me. "You are not going to be a salesman."

"Why not?"

"Because it's a miserable job," he said. "That's why not. Because I wish I wasn't a salesman and I don't want you to be wishing the same thing someday. You can be whatever you want when you grow up, just not a salesman. Okay?"

"Okay," I said.

He slipped the keys into the ignition. "I'm glad we got that out of the way," he said. "Wish my father had done the same for me." Then he shifted into reverse, stretched his right arm across the bench seat, and turned his head like he always did to back up. "Don't get me wrong," he said. "You could easily be as good a salesman as I am, but you're going to do something better."

That was the last business trip I took with my father. He gave me the college education he longed to have, pushed me to become a doctor when that was what I dreamed of, then pushed me to become a writer when I discovered that was what I wanted to be.

Still, those road trips have stayed with me, shaping not only what I write, but also how I write. For instance, I like to be in my study early in the mornings. When the work is going well, I'm in my chair in time to watch the sunrise. I see it brighten the room and I can feel the day opening up in front of me, like a clear highway, full of promise.

Reader's Group Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Max Wolinsky knows he shouldn't run the scam against the Goulds, and yet he tries to convince himself that he has good, justifiable reasons for his actions. What do you think of the moral compromises Max makes with himself? What separates a salesman from a con man? Do you believe that even people who haven't been con men make similar compromises with themselves?

2. The epigraph in *Responsible Men* comes from Arthur Miller's famous play *Death of a Salesman*: "A salesman is got to dream, boy. It comes with the territory." How does this epigraph speak to the story of the Wolinsky family?

3. This novel focuses on four generations of men (Solomon, Abe and Caleb, Max, and Nathan), spanning much of the twentieth century. There are many changes from one generation to the next in the Wolinsky family. How do these four generations of men see the world differently? At the same time, in what ways are they similar to one another?

4. The point of view shifts from chapter to chapter in *Responsible Men*—Max, Caleb, Abe, Nathan, and Estelle all have chapters written from their point of view. How does this help you understand the Wolinsky family? What might the book

have been like if it had all been told from Max's point of view? Which point of view did you enjoy the most and why? What did you think when, late in the book, Estelle was given her own chapters?

5. Max's ex-wife, Sandy, says that during their marriage she used to worry "about Max and what he was going to do next" (page 95). But then she stopped worrying. "The worry doesn't come," she says. "I just wind up angry" (page 95). How do you understand what happened between Sandy and Max? Why did she become "angry"? Do you think Sandy and Hiram will stay together?

6. Though the book is called *Responsible Men*, there are many important female characters throughout the novel. Caleb is haunted by Naomi, Max loses Sandy and falls for Estelle, and Nathan gets his first kiss from Jennifer. How do these relationships shape the Wolinsky men? What do these men learn from these women?

7. What makes Caleb change his mind about scamming the Goulds?

8. Though Abe has had a stroke and has lost the ability to make himself understood to those around him, his mind is filled with thoughts and memories. What did his memories of the past add to the story? Why do you think his chapters are the only chapters written in the present tense? Why do you think he was so obsessed with getting a scooter?

9. Several verses from the bible play an important role in the novel. The story of Caleb in the Book of Numbers seems especially

important to Caleb, Max, and Nathan (pages 48–50 and pages 52–53). What does this particular story mean to each of the Wolinsky men?

10. Mervyn Spiller is a mysterious character throughout the novel. It takes Max a long time to learn whether or not he should trust Spiller. Do you think Spiller was trustworthy? Why or why not? What do you think motivates Spiller?

11. “Solomon strides to the front door, hat in hand, as confident as ever, ready for another day of work. He turns to Abe. ‘Let’s go, son,’ he says. ‘It’s time. No rest for the middlemen.’ Abe doesn’t hesitate. He follows his father” (page 278). “No rest for the middleman” is a saying that is passed down from one generation of Wolinskys to the next. How do the members of each generation use the concept of the middleman to mediate between their Jewish and American identities? How does this understanding change from generation to generation? In what other ways are the characters in this novel middlemen and middlewomen?

12. Before Nathan leaves for camp, he asks his father to tell him the worst thing he’s ever done (page 198). Max answers him with a question. Why do you think he does that? What do *you* think is the worst thing he’s done? If you asked your father the same question, how would he answer? How would you answer your child?

13. At the end of the book, Nathan feels hopeful about his family’s future. Do you feel hopeful about the future of the Wolinskys? What do you think will happen between Max and Estelle?

Suggested Reading from the Author

Death of a Salesman, Arthur Miller

Glengarry Glen Ross, David Mamet

The Big Con, David W. Maurer

The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald

Goodbye, Columbus, Philip Roth

Patrimony, Philip Roth

Nobody's Fool, Richard Russo

Enormous Changes at the Last Minute, Grace Paley

The Franchiser, Stanley Elkin

Odessa Stories, Isaac Babel

Billy Phelan's Greatest Game, William Kennedy

The Coast of Chicago, Stuart Dybek

East of Eden, John Steinbeck

The Confidence-Man, Herman Melville

The Heart of the Matter, Graham Greene

Rock Springs, Richard Ford

This Boy's Life, Tobias Wolff

Franny and Zooey, J. D. Salinger

Rum Punch, Elmore Leonard

Into Their Labours: A Trilogy, John Berger

