

FIREBRANDS Reading Guide

1. What are some of the parallels you see between the role of women in politics today and their role in the 1920s?
2. What do you see in today's political scene that is reminiscent of the political scene in the Jazz Age?
3. Of the four chief characters in this book – Ella Boole, Mabel Walker Willebrandt, Texas Guinan, and Pauline Sabin – who did you find the most compelling and why?
4. Did your opinion of the characters change over the course of reading this book?
5. What was the most surprising aspect of this story?
6. Why do you think a jury failed to convict Texas Guinan, the most famous speakeasy hostess in America, of violating the Volstead Act? Did Mabel Walker Willebrandt overstep in ordering the speakeasy raids on the night of Alfred Smith's nomination as the Democratic candidate for U.S. president?
7. Neither WONPR nor the WCTU had a great record when it came to treating Black women as equals in their respective organizations. Do you find that one group was more enlightened than the other?
8. Before Pauline Sabin started WONPR, several other anti-Prohibition organizations, most run by men, came and went. Why was Pauline Sabin able to organize an effective Repeal organization where so many others had failed?
9. What lessons does Pauline Sabin's activism hold for today's world? Do you think it would be possible for women today to organize a similar grass roots organization to push for, say, gun control legislation? After all, a woman who'd lost her daughter to a drunk driving accident, started an organization in the 1980s that successfully lobbied Congress to raise the drinking age to 21.
10. The main characters in this book all had fraught personal lives, marked by wrenching loss – the death of a child, divorce, widowhood. In your view how did each of them handle loss, and do you think they could have better managed their personal lives and emotions?

11. Do you think any of the women in this book were treated unfairly by the press? If so, which ones and why?
12. Alcoholism rates have been rising in the U.S. for decades. At the same time, particularly among young people, there's been a movement toward sobriety. Sober vacations, sober bars, sober parties, and sober sanctuaries at concert venues have proliferated in recent years. Meanwhile, sales of nonalcoholic beer, wine and spirits are soaring. What do you think has sparked today's sobriety trend, and do you think it will last?