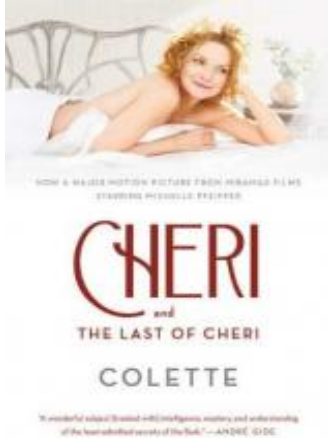


Cheri and The Last of Cheri

by Colette



About the Book

First published in 1920 and now a major motion picture starring Michelle Pfeiffer, **Chéri** is one of Colette's most admired novels. By turns sensual and intensely emotional, the love affair captured in this sparkling work raises timeless questions about the nature of power and longing in relationships. Known as Chéri, Fred Peloux is a young playboy under the spell of Léa de Lonval, a courtesan twice his age. Once famous for her beauty and charisma, she must confront the reality of her fading good looks, along with Chéri's intention to marry a wealthy girl. Yet Chéri is deeply attached to Léa, and the feeling is mutual --- a realization neither lover can fully comprehend until they have abandoned their affair. Set against the backdrop of the Roaring Twenties, with dazzling glimpses of French culture before and after World War I, this is a mesmerizing portrait of desire and its aftermath.

Discussion Guide

1. What did you discover about Colette's life by reading Judith Thurman's introduction? Why might Colette have opposed suffragettes while applauding women who were financially independent? How did the knowledge of Colette's later affair with her stepson affect your reading of **Chéri**?
2. Discuss the novel's theme of physical beauty. Does a woman's power lie in her appearance? When it comes to aging and the laws of attraction, do equal standards exist between men and women?
3. In the novel, power is also derived by showing no desire: both Léa and Chéri are careful not to reveal their feelings for each other. Do you think this is the way most couples experience a relationship? Would Léa and Chéri have stayed together if they had talked of love sooner, or did uncertainty keep their relationship alive?

4. Do Madame Peloux and Madame Marie-Laure (Edmée's mother) have similar approaches to parenting? Are they good mothers?
5. What did Patron, the boxer, try to teach Chéri about being a man? What does Chéri seem to believe about the differences between men and women? Why does his femininity vex Léa?
6. To what extent does Léa act as a surrogate mother for Chéri? Is it good for wives and girlfriends to behave maternally toward their men?
7. What are the other effects of the age difference between Chéri and Léa? How does age give Léa an advantage over Edmée?
8. How does Desmond's club reflect France's cultural history during this time period? What was symbolic about the sale of Léa's home (to Americans, no less)?
9. What does Chéri mean when, on page 263, he says that he is chaste while the rest of the world is mired in deception? Is he right?
10. In terms of mood, tone, and storytelling, what shifts did you notice between **Chéri** and **The Last of Chéri**? How did your impressions of Chéri change between the opening scenes of **Chéri** and the closing scenes of **The Last of Chéri**?
11. Does Léa's life appeal to you? Who is her twenty-first-century equivalent?
12. Would Léa have married Chéri, given the chance? Would their marriage have been happier than his marriage to Edmée? What is the difference between Léa's financial power and Edmée's?
13. What pain is Chéri trying to relieve in the closing scene of **The Last of Chéri**? Do his actions mean that Léa "won"?
14. What distinctions did you notice between **Chéri** and the film? What might Colette have said about the production? What made Michelle Pfeiffer ideal for the role of Léa?
15. Which of Colette's novels had you read previously? How does **Chéri** echo Colette's other portrayals of men as lovers?

Author Bio

Colette (1873-1954) published some eighty volumes of fiction and nonfiction. She also had careers as a newspaper reporter, screenwriter, and music-hall star. Acknowledged in her lifetime as a master of modern French prose, she was the first woman admitted into the Académie Goncourt.

Critical Praise

?Everything that Colette touched became human . . . She was a complete sensualist; but she gave herself up to her senses with such delicacy of perception, with such exquisiteness of physical pain as well as physical ecstasy, that she ennobled sensualism to grandeur.?

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