

A FORTUNE OF SAND

BY RUTA SEPETYS
DISCUSSION GUIDE

In the glittering world of 1920s Detroit—where fortunes are built and broken overnight—*A Fortune of Sand* invites readers beyond the illusion of wealth and into the fragile architecture beneath it. At the center of the story is a young woman born into privilege, yet quietly suffocating under its expectations. As ambition, deception, and societal control intertwine, the novel reveals a deeper truth. That beneath every carefully constructed façade lies something far more human: vulnerability, longing, and the courage to seize power when others are determined to deny it. Set against the backdrop of an era often remembered for its glamour, *A Fortune of Sand* shines light in the shadows that history left behind.



THEME: FACADE VS. REALITY

- The novel explores the idea that something beautiful on the surface can conceal instability beneath. Where do you see this most clearly—in the novel and today?
- How does the metaphor of “sand” function in the story? What does it suggest about legacy, power, or truth?
- Can you think of examples—past or present—where a polished exterior concealed a more complicated or unstable reality?



WOMEN, CONTROL & AGENCY

- The 1920s are often romanticized as a time of liberation. Why do you think this became the dominant narrative of the era? How does the novel challenge that narrative, particularly for women?
- In what ways do control and autonomy manifest in the lives of the female characters? Who holds power—and who appears to, but does not?
- How do societal expectations influence the choices available to women in the story?



HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- Many U.S. cities once had entire neighborhoods built to display wealth and permanence, yet many have disappeared or been transformed. Why do you think societies preserve certain spaces while allowing others to vanish—and what does that reveal about how we remember history?
- Did the novel change or deepen your understanding of the 1920s? If so, how?
- What parallels, if any, do you see between the world of the novel and contemporary society?



SECRETS, TRUTH & LEGACY

- Several characters are shaped by secrets—either those they keep or those they uncover. What role do secrets play in shaping the narrative?
- What does the novel suggest about legacy? Is legacy something we inherit, construct, or dismantle?
- Do the Lennox secrets prevent pain or prolong it?
- How are family status and legacy defined in the U.S. versus the UK and other countries?
- What does *A Fortune of Sand* ultimately suggest about the cost of illusion—and the value of truth?



CHARACTER REFLECTIONS

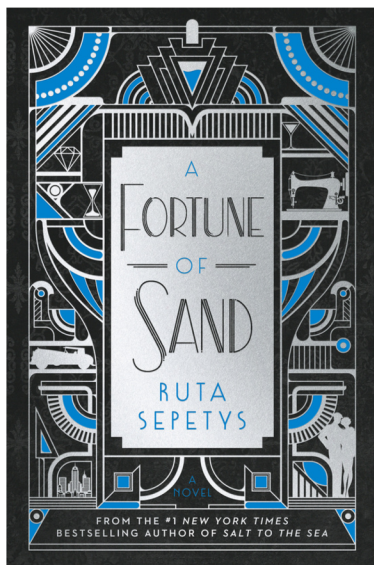
- In what ways does Marjorie’s wealth both empower and confine her? How does the tension between freedom and control evolve over the course of the novel?
- How do you interpret Bonafante’s character? Does he operate within a moral code, or is he ultimately shaped by the world of power and crime he inhabits?
- What do you believe drives Graham at his core? Are his actions rooted in ambition, protection, control, or something more personal?
- In what ways does Chet’s loss of her mother inform her identity, her vulnerabilities, and the choices she makes?
- Marjorie’s friendships with Bernice and Ivy offer glimpses of different paths for women. How did you interpret these relationships, and what do they reveal about belonging, influence, and independence?
- The story of Grandpa Lennox carries an air of ambiguity and myth. What do you imagine may have truly happened in Scotland, and how does that possibility reshape your understanding of the family’s legacy?
- Lilah’s actions invite both judgment and empathy. To what extent do you see her behavior as justified, shaped by circumstance, or driven by personal ambition?



PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

THESE QUESTIONS INVITE PERSONAL REFLECTION. SHARE WHAT FEELS COMFORTABLE.

- Reflecting on your own ancestry, are there individuals in your family who may have been misunderstood or mischaracterized in their time?
- In your birthplace or hometown, what are some things that were once vital but have now vanished?
- How did the women in your family find ways to cope, adapt, or survive within the constraints placed upon them? Are there examples of quiet resistance that stand out to you?
- Have any of your family stories been passed down in fragments or silence—particularly about women? What do you think was left unsaid, and why?
- The novel explores how reputation could define—and confine—a woman’s life. Do you know of an ancestor whose reputation, whether accurate or not, shaped her opportunities or relationships?
- How has our modern understanding of mental health changed the way we interpret the lives of women from earlier generations?
- If you could ask one female ancestor a question about her life—particularly about her inner world—what would you want to know?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Ruta Sepetys is an internationally acclaimed, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of historical fiction published in over sixty countries and forty languages. Considered a “crossover” novelist, her books are read by both students and adults worldwide. Winner of the Carnegie Medal and honored by the American Academy of Arts and Letters, Ruta is renowned for giving voice to underrepresented history and those who experienced it.

