

## Sample Book Club Discussion Questions For *Madam*

1. Most people have a glamorous vision of the Jazz Age, usually gleaned from reading *The Great Gatsby* in high school, and watching gangster movies and screwball comedies. How did *Madam* change your vision of those years?

2. Polly Adler said: “If I had all of history to choose from, I could hardly have picked a better age in which to be a madam.” What do you think she meant?

3. All sorts of women worked for Polly—from full-time professional hustlers who lived in her brothels to aspiring actresses and singers who secretly worked as part-time call girls while waiting for their big break. Overall, would you say that Polly was helping or harming the women who worked for her?

5. What did you make of the fact that so many men, of all walks of life, used Polly’s services? Do you think that men today are as likely to go to a brothel or hire a call girl as they were earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Has the “double standard” faded or is it still a common belief?

4. Did you find Polly likable or sympathetic? Is it possible to overlook – or at least understand – the fact that *she chose* to be so deeply immersed in crime, vice and various forms of exploitation?

6. Polly was arrested well over a dozen times, but only went to jail once. She was sentenced to one month in the Women’s Prison and received five days off for good behavior. If it were up to you, do you believe she should have spent more than 25 days behind bars?

7. Almost all of the policemen who appear in Polly’s life are corrupt in various ways – taking bribes, having sex with prostitutes (for free!), protecting Polly from arrest, befriending bootleggers and gamblers. How did these stories of corrupt cops affect your thinking about policing?

8. Polly craved social stature and respectability and wanted to be remembered by posterity. She saved trunks of mementos, scrapbooks, letters and reel-to-reel recordings of her reminiscences. In 1953, Polly published a blockbuster memoir, *A House is Not a Home*, that sold 2 million copies.

So, why do you think that we remember her male criminal colleagues – sociopathic gangsters like Bugsy Siegel, Meyer Lansky, Lucky Luciano and Al Capone – and turned them into American mythic figures – while Polly has been mostly forgotten by history?

9. Polly like to cast herself a classic Horatio Alger American success story, but with an unexpected twist. Is that a fair way to describe her? Or would it be more accurate to describe her as an American tragedy? Would you say her story had a “happy ending”?