

## *The Pawnbroker*

by Edward Lewis Wallant

### Discussion Questions for Book Groups and Clubs

- 1) In some ways, Sol Nazerman is a challenging protagonist: although his circumstances make the reader want to pity him, it becomes clear early on in the novel that he certainly does not want and may or may not deserve our pity. How might this have affected your reading of the novel? Did you sympathize with Sol? If not, what drove you to care about his story? How does Wallant challenge our notions about the nature of sympathy, the nature of pity, and the distinction between them?
- 2) When this novel was published in 1961, there were few American cultural markers of the Holocaust: no *Holocaust* miniseries, no *Schindler's List*, no U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Imagine (and discuss) the impact of this novel on a readership that may not have had much awareness of the experiences of European Jews deported to concentration/extermination camps. (If your group includes members who recall the book's original publication, imagining may not be necessary.)
- 3) What kinds of tensions within American Jewry at the time—circa 1960—does Wallant suggest in his portrait of Sol's relationship with his sister and her family? Has anything changed today?
- 4) What do you make of the novel's multicultural cast of characters and the relationships between characters who hail from different races/religions/ethnicities?
- 5) If this novel were being published for the first time now (2015), how might you read/react to it differently?
- 6) Have you seen the Sidney Lumet's 1964 film—starring Rod Steiger as Sol Nazerman—that was based on this novel? If so, what do you think of the modifications that were made to *The Pawnbroker* from page to screen? What may have been lost (or gained) in the “translation”?
- 7) How is this novel different from other “Holocaust novels” you may have read?
- 8) What do you make of the fact that Sol's last name is “Nazerman” (perhaps invoking Nazareth) and the extent to which the novel's climax depends on a key event involving a character named Jesus? What do you think Wallant is trying to do here with Christian symbolism in this Jewish book?
- 9) “[Edward Lewis] Wallant was often compared in his brief lifetime with his contemporary Saul Bellow,” notes Dara Horn in her foreword to this edition of *The Pawnbroker*. How might you compare Wallant's work in *The Pawnbroker* with that of Bellow? Of other major American Jewish writers?
- 10) If you could ask Edward Lewis Wallant one question directly, what might it be?