

American Heiress Discussion Questions

by Jeffrey Toobin

Author Bio: (from Wikipedia & Jeffrey Toobin's website)

Jeffrey Ross Toobin (1960) is an American lawyer, blogger, author, pundit, and legal analyst for CNN and The New Yorker. He moved into writing during the 1990s.



Characters:

- **Patricia Hearst** – (19) – Tiny or Tania – Granddaughter of William Randolph Hearst (newspaper magnet). Middle daughter of 5. Art major at Berkeley. Working as a waitress. Kidnapped by SLA.
- **SLA (Symbionese Liberation Army)** – “Symbiosis of Freedom through War.” Wanted to wage war on the status quo. Used a 7 headed cobra as its symbol.
- **SLA Members:**
 - **Donald Defreeze** – (30) – *Cin* or *Cinque M'tume* – Lifetime criminal. Escaped from prison in 1973. Leader of the SLA. Only black member of SLA. General Field Marshal in the United Federated Forces of the Symbionese Liberation Army. Estranged from his wife and 3 kids. Liked bombs and guns. Sent to Vacaville prison near Berkeley. Born in Cleveland.
 - **Patricia Soltysik** – *Mizmoon* or *Zoya* – Hall's girlfriend. Worked p/t for the Berkeley Public Library as a janitor. Becomes the SLA's researcher.
 - **Nancy Ling Perry** – *Fahiza* – Volatile. A sex worker turned terrorist. Into drugs. Writes most of the SLA's communications.
 - **Angela Atwood** – *General Gelina* – Beautiful, aspiring actress. Ditzzy and charismatic. Became friends with Patricia after her kidnapping.
 - **Camilla Hall** – *Gabi* – College graduate with a degree in social work. Poet. Was dating Mizmoon before kidnapping.
 - **Bill Harris** – *Teko* – Vietnam Vet. Compulsive talker. Revolutionary. Married to Emily Harris. Joined SLA after Foster assassination. The food distribution ransom was his idea.
 - **Emily Harris** – *Yolanda* – Bill's wife. Joined SLA after Foster assassination.
 - **Russ Little** – *Osceola* – True hippie. Middle class upbringing. Affected a redneck persona.
 - **Joe Remiro** – *Bo* – Grew up lower class with Italian and Mexican parents. Enlisted in Vietnam. The true soldier of the group. Gun expert.
 - **Willie Wolf** – (20) – *Cujo* or *Kahjoh* – Young, naïve student who worked as a tutor for various prisons. Comes from an upper class family.
- **Revolutionary Army members** – (Urban guerillas):
 - **Mike Bortin** – Revolutionary and bomb maker.
 - **Jim Kilgore** – Revolutionary and bomb maker.
 - **Kathy Soliah** – Actress – Organized a rally for the deceased SLA members. Hearst eventually joins up with her and her group. Lives with Jim Kilgore.

- **Josephine Soliah** – Kathy's little sister. Revolutionary.
- **Steve Soliah** – Kathy's brother. Athletic and easy going. House painter and revolutionary. Dates and lives with Patty Hearst while on the run.
- **Wendy Yoshimara** – *Joan Shimada* – Japanese American artist and revolutionary. Seeing Willie Brant, a revolutionary jailed for bomb making. She escaped with Jack Scott's help.
- **Charles Bates** – FBI Special Agent in charge of San Francisco office and Hearst kidnapping.
- **F. Lee Bailey** – Famous lawyer who takes Hearst case.
- **Jim Browning** – US Attorney for San Francisco. Tried Hearst case.
- **Marcus Foster** – Black Superintendent of Oakland Schools. Loved education. Popular with the public. Killed/assassinated November 6, 1973 by SLA – (Defreeze, Ling, and Mizmoon).
- **Monte Hall** – FBI deputy in charge of day-to-day operations of Hearst investigation.
- **Terrance Hallinan** – *Kayo* – Randy hires Hallinan lawyer clan to represent Patty. Terrance steals case from his father and brother.
- **Catherine Hearst** – Patricia's mother.
- **Randolph Hearst** – Patricia's father. Son of newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst.
- **J. Albert Johnson** – Bailey's second lawyer/aide. Acts as a surrogate father to Patricia during trial.
- **Tom Matthews** – High school baseball student carjacked/kidnapped by the Harrises and Hearst after the Mel's shootout.
- **George Martinez** – Local lawyer took over Hearst case after guilty verdict. Worked for a reduction and presidential commutation of Hearst's sentence.
- **Myrna Opsahl** – (42) – Bystander at the Carmichael Crocker National Bank robbery. Shot and killed by Emily.
- **William Orrik Jr** – New judge in the Hearst trial after Oliver Carter dies unexpectedly.
- **Jack Scott** – Journalist and activist. Helps the remaining members of SLA hide out at farm in PA because he wants to write a book about the SLA. Wife is Micki. His parents, John and Lydia (Lou), help move the SLA members across the country. Has a brother, Walter, who is an alcoholic and former Marine.
- **Bernie Shaw** – Police Officer. Married with 2 kids. Eventually gets a divorce. He is hired as Patricia Hearst's main guard. Eventually married Patricia in April 1979.
- **Tony Shepard** – Clerk at Mel's Sporting Goods store who caught Bill Harris shoplifting and tried to stop him. (Aspiring police officer.)
- **Steven Suenaga** – Cal student. Bystander/neighbor who was hit in head during Hearst kidnapping.
- **Trish Tobin** – Patricia's longtime childhood friend.
- **Steven Weed** – (25) – Patricia and Steve live together. They are tentatively engaged. He was her high school math teacher. In graduate school for philosophy @ University of California at Berkeley. Ran away during kidnapping.

Timeline:

- November 6, 1973 – SLA assassinates Marcus Foster.
- January 1974 Heart and Weed's engagement announcement runs in newspapers.
- January 10, 1974 – Little and Remiro are arrested during traffic stop and subsequent police shootout with police officer David Duge.
- February 4, 1974 – SLA kidnaps Patricia Hearst.
 - Carjacked Peter Benson for his car. Assaults Hearst, Weed, and Suenaga.
 - Puts Hearst in trunk and then keeps her in a closet. Told she is a "Prisoner of War".
- February 7, 1974 – 1st communication from SLA about Hearst.
- February 11, 1974 -- 2nd communication – Ransom demand for food give-away.
- February 20, 1974 – Patricia Hearst turns 20.
- February 22, 1974 – 1st Food give-away occurs.
- March 31, 1974 – Patricia Hearst decides to join SLA instead of going free.

- April 3, 1974 – Hearst announces to world she has joined SLA. (59 days after kidnapping.)
- April 15, 1974 – SLA robs Hibernia Bank for \$10,660. Patricia Hearst helps and carries a gun.
- May 16, 1974 – Harris is caught shoplifting at Mel's Sporting Goods & Patricia goes on a shooting spree to save him. No one injured. The Harris's and Patricia flee, which results in number of carjackings and the kidnapping of Tom Matthews.
- May 17, 1974 – Police find SLA flophouse. A gun battle and house fire ensues resulting in the deaths of Lin (26), Hall (29), Defreeze (30), Angela (25), Mizmoon (24), and Willy (23). Patricia Hearst and Bill and Emily Harris, who were elsewhere, go on the run.
- June 1974 – Patricia Hearst and the Harris family run to PA farm with Jack Scott's help.

- February 1975 – remaining SLA members join up with the Revolutionary Army bombers. Hide out together.
- February 25, 1975 and April 21, 1975 – Group begins to rob banks – Guild Savings and Loan (\$3700) and the Carmichael Crocker National Bank (\$15000) where bystander Myrna Opsahl is killed.
- Summer 1975 – SLA and RA members try to bomb police stations. Most bombings are duds and few police cars are destroyed. No injuries.
- Walter Scott tells police about his brother Jack and how he helped the SLA members at the PA farm. Micki and Jack are taken in for questioning.
 - Jay Weiner, college student and Scott protégé, is interviewed, as well.
 - Soliah family is interviewed.
- August/September 1975 – FBI captures Harris family on their morning jog. They catch Wendy Yoshimura and Patricia Hearst at home. Captures Steve Soliah later.
 - Kathy Soliah, Josephine Soliah, Jim Kilgore and Michael Bortin get away.

- February 4, 1976 – Hearst goes to trial. Exactly 2 years after kidnapping. Trial takes 8 weeks.
 - Patricia takes the stand in her own defense. Pleads the 5th for everything that happened after the PA farm.
 - Patricia takes a deal for immunity in the Carmichael robbery and murder.
 - Jury deliberated 1 day. Guilty on both charges. Mostly due to the Monkey totem and Tom Matthew's testimony.

- June 14, 1976 – Judge Oliver Carter dies before sentencing. Judge Orrick takes over.
- September 24, 1976 – Trial ends. Hearst gets 7 years in prison.
- The Harrises get 6 years for the Hearst and Matthews kidnappings. (They both Serve 5). 27 years later Emily Harris gets 6 years in prison for Opsahl's death.
- May 1978 – Patrica goes back to prison.
- January 29, 1979 Hearst is given clemency by President Jimmy Carter on January 29, 1979. She gets out 1 day shy of the 5th anniversary of her kidnapping. Served a total of 22 months.
- Hearst marries Shaw and eventually has 2 daughters, Gillian and Lydia. Hearst raises dogs in her later years.
- Asks President Bill Clinton for a full presidential pardon. He grants it on January 21, 2001.

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. What was the ideology of the Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) and what were its goals? How would you characterize the group and its tactics—clever, passionate, inept, foolish, or misguided? What did the SLA hope to gain by capturing Patty Hearst?
3. Toobin presents individual portraits of SLA members. Did those back stories generate any understanding or compassion on your part?
4. What was Patty Hearst like? How would you describe her: as a cossetted, spoiled, rich young woman...as haughty, humble, insecure, or shy? Does Toobin present her sympathetically or unsympathetically?
5. Talk about Steven Weed. Toobin writes of him, "If there was one point of unanimity among the protagonists in the kidnapping...it was contempt for Patricia's erstwhile fiancé." Why was he the subject of such loathing?
6. How do Patty's parents come off in this account, her father especially? Toobin praises Randy's "curiosity, his decency and above all his love for his daughter"? Do you agree? What about Patty's mother and her black dresses?
7. The mass food giveaway was the first time in the US a political kidnapping forced an event. What do you think of that? Was it the right response? Was it the wrong response?
8. The Hearsts' response to the kidnapping was seen by conservatives as the parents being too lenient and giving in, saying "Weakness in crisis! Not strength." What do you think? Did they bow to pressure? What would you do to save your child?
9. Talk about law enforcement's bungling of the case.
10. How does Toobin present the Hearst's lawyer, F. Lee Bailey?
11. What prompted Hearst's decision to join the ranks of her captors? During the trial, her defense said she acted out of "coercive persuasion" (what is now popularly referred to as "Stockholm Syndrome"). What was the basis of that defense...and is a convincing one to you? What does Toobin think?

12. Hearst was 19/20 at the time of her kidnapping. Do you think age was a factor in regards to the actions of the SLA and Revolutionary Army members?
13. Do you believe in the “Stockholm effect?” If yes, why do you think it happens?
14. Should Patricia Hearst have been held responsible for her actions? Which ones? At what point in the timeline do you believe Patricia becomes responsible for her own actions?
15. Do you think Hearst's conviction is fair? Should she have been cleared? Or do you think her sentence should have been longer?
16. Describe Toobin's reaction toward Patty Hearst's campaign for a presidential pardon even though her sentence had been commuted. What do you think?
17. How familiar were you with the Hearst kidnapping before reading American Heiress? What have you learned after reading it? Were there any surprises?
18. Does knowing that Patricia Hearst did not participate in the writing of this book change your feelings about it and its conclusions?
19. Toobin has written six other books. Will you read any of them?

References:

- Lit Lovers – <http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/non-fiction/10791-american-heiress-toobin?start=3>
- Novelist – <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/novp/detail?vid=2&sid=c6b62e86-17ab-4da7-95ef-70a5e71d3de2%40pdc-v-sessmgr02&bdata=JnNpdGU9bm92cC1saXZl#U=10515876&db=neh>
- Jeffrey Toobin website – <http://www.jeffreytoobin.com/>
- Wikipedia – https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jeffrey_Toobin

Jeffrey Toobin Books

- **American Heiress: The Wild Saga of the Kidnapping, Crimes and Trial of Patty Hearst** (2016)
- **The Oath: The Obama White House and The Supreme Court** (2012)
- **The Nine: Inside the Secret World of the Supreme Court** (2007)
- **Too Close to Call: The Thirty-Six-Day Battle to Decide the 2000 Election** (2001)
- **A Vast Conspiracy: The Real Story of the Sex Scandal That Nearly Brought Down a President** (2000)
- **The Run of His Life: The People versus O.J. Simpson** (1996)
- **Opening Arguments: A Young Lawyer's First Case: United States v. Oliver North** (1991)

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- Radical Descent – Linda Coleman
- Patty's Got a Gun – William Graebner
- Every Secret Thing – Patricia Hearst
- Days of Rage – Bryan Burrough
- Trance – Christopher Sorrentino