

Summer at Tiffany

by Marjorie Hart

About the Book

Do you remember the best summer of your life?

New York City, 1945. Marjorie Jacobson and her best friend, Marty Garrett, arrive fresh from the Kappa house at the University of Iowa hoping to find summer positions as shopgirls. Turned away from the top department stores, they miraculously find jobs as pages at Tiffany & Co., becoming the first women to ever work on the sales floor — a diamond-filled day job replete with Tiffany blue shirtwaist dresses from Bonwit Teller's — and the envy of all their friends.

Hart takes us back to the magical time when she and Marty rubbed elbows with the rich and famous; pinched pennies to eat at the Automat; experienced nightlife at La Martinique; and danced away their weekends with dashing midshipmen. Between being dazzled by Judy Garland's honeymoon visit to Tiffany, celebrating VJ Day in Times Square, and mingling with Café society, she fell in love, learned unforgettable lessons, made important decisions that would change her future, and created the remarkable memories she now shares with all of us.

Praise for the Book

“This warm account of more innocent times makes an unspoken comparison with the way we live now. A fond backward glance.”

— *Kirkus Reviews*

“A glorious once-upon-a-time fairytale come true . . . charming and delicious . . . I loved every moment!”

— **Adriana Trigiani,**
author of *Lucia, Lucia* and the *Big Stone Gap* series

“A charming story of a charmed summer in an era gone by. I didn't want Marjorie Hart's effervescent memoir to end.”

— **Emily Griffin,**
author of *Baby Proof*, *Something Borrowed*, and *Something Blue*

“Hart's infectious vivacity resonates with a madcap immediacy, delectably capturing the city's heady vibrancy and a young girl's guileless enchantment.”

— *Booklist*

Courtesy of HarperCollins

About the Author

Marjorie Hart, now eighty-three, is the former chairman of the Fine Arts Department at the University of San Diego and a professional cellist. She lives in La Mesa, California.

Author Interview

Q: What was the catalyst that finally got you writing *Summer at Tiffany* at the age of 83?

Marjorie Hart: The compelling reason to write my memoir was that extraordinary summer of 1945. Marty and I witnessed history: General Eisenhower's Fifth Avenue Parade with 4 million cheering New Yorkers, the morning the Queen Mary steamed into NYC harbor with 14 thousand soldiers touching US soil, and the unforgettable celebration at Times Square on VJ Day. But it was that once-in-a-lifetime job at Tiffany & Co which made me write and rewrite. Who could resist?

Q: When you sat down to write about your summer in New York, where did you start?

MH: I always began my story with our ride on the top deck of the Fifth Avenue bus. Our first glimpse of famous buildings, glamorous stores and the screeching sounds of city life still gives me goosebumps!

Q: When you first arrived in New York, what are some of the very first things that struck you as novel, or gave you a sense of culture shock?

MH: When Marty and I approached NYC from Iowa, the train plunged into a long dark tunnel underneath the city, then glided into Grand Central Station, a palace of bright-paned windows. That dramatic transition from the mysterious dark of the subway to the morning light was a phenomenal introduction to NYC.

Q: You had a good sixty-something years of carrying with you the stories that would eventually become this book. Which stories from *Summer at Tiffany* were the ones you told the most over the years?

MH: The stories I've repeated most frequently for my grandchildren are the scary ones by their request. The pearls, the gangster, or the police at Jones Beach!

Q: Your friend Marty, with whom you worked at Tiffany, clearly had an extraordinary, “why not?” spirit. She was the first to suggest a summer in New York City. She bolted off the Fifth Avenue bus and walked brazenly into Tiffany’s on an otherwise discouraging and fruitless day of job hunting. She impressed you by revealing that her Vogue-like wardrobe was entirely self-made, right down to knitting her own sweaters. What did Marty teach you by example that stayed with you?

MH: Marty’s “why not” spirit made a huge impact on my life. She was resourceful, confident and fearless, the ideal model for my timid self. I learned from her to take chances and seize opportunities I had never dared before!

Q: In the book you describe the day a B-25 Army bomber accidentally flew into the Empire State Building. Some of your details of the accident, the reaction of New Yorkers to the news, even the unsettling acrid smell of the smoke were eerily reminiscent of 9/11. What elements of 9/11 felt most familiar to you?

MH: When 9/11 happened, I immediately remembered the shock of the B-25 crash into the Empire State Building. Mayor LaGuardia, with his fire helmet, insisted on riding an elevator to rescue trapped people. He joined the firemen until the fire was under control. The bravery of LaGuardia reminded me of the courageous spirit of the firemen that tragic day of 9/11.

Q: In more than one part of the book, you express what you learned from your family about being emotionally stoical. You wrote, “. . . my great-aunt Margretha warned us not to show our feelings — it’s a sign of weakness. We should not fall apart, complain, or envy others. I recited her words like a child.” How has the way you deal with your emotions evolved since you were that young impressionable girl?

MH: Growing up in Story City, I felt there were a thousand eyes following me. “What will people say?” It regulated my life. Later when difficult choices were necessary, I tried to find my own path and to set aside ordinary conventions. I was no longer restricted by other people’s opinions.

Q: During the summer of 1945 you grew fond of a young Navy man named Jim. I almost expected you to marry him, but you didn’t. I feel so invested in both you and Jim as characters, I can’t help but ask: how did that relationship end?

MH: Jim was unusually kind and considerate. When we met again after he returned from the Navy in the Pacific, I had to be truthful. I had fallen in love with someone else. Breaking that relationship is still a painful memory.

Q: There's a scene in *Summer* in which you describe kissing Jim, ". . . in broad daylight. I was vaguely aware of people passing, horns honking, and someone bumping into us saying, Lucky guy. I didn't care. . . ." It put me in mind of the famous Life magazine cover photo of the sailor kissing the woman in Times Square on V-J Day, which you also wrote about as an eyewitness. By today's standards, a woman kissing a man on a New York street is not notable enough to draw the kind of attention you and Jim received, or even to create much self-consciousness on the part of most women. So how were people's sensibilities different in 1945 when it came to public displays of affection?

MH: Public displays of affection are so different today and less inhibited. A good thing! In 1945, some flamboyant New Yorkers kissed and hugged in greeting each other — a shock to us! If I had done the same in Iowa, it would have been a town scandal. However, there were special occasions, like New Year's Eve that were acceptable. Eisenstadt's photograph epitomized the spontaneous passion of that moment. Everyone wanted to celebrate with abandon!

Q: After returning to Iowa from your summer in the big city, what did you miss most about New York?

MH: How I missed my New York friends after I returned. In fact, I returned between Christmas and New Years, to see Jim, but also the Shuttleworths and those memorable Tiffany salesmen.

Q: In *Summer at Tiffany* you're presented with an opportunity to study music at Yale, but ultimately you left it behind to return to Iowa. Have you ever entertained what your life might have looked like if you'd gone to Yale after all?

MH: Returning to school at the University of Iowa, my cello teacher, Mr. Koelbel, surprised me with challenging musical opportunities: radio programs, solo performances and even a bit part in a movie! He generously helped me acquire a faculty position at DePauw University when I graduated. But meeting the handsome Navy dental student I later married was the most important part of my senior year. I never thought of Yale as a better choice.

Q: Was there any part of the memoir that got "left on the cutting room floor," so to speak, that you wish you could have kept in the book?

MH: When I first began writing, I included early Story City days. However, discovering it would be published — no longer for just my family — the stories no longer fit.

Q: 59 years after your summer in New York, you finally returned to Manhattan. We missed you — what took you so long?

MH: I did miss going back to NYC, but when I began teaching music history at USD, it meant traveling to Europe instead. I researched eighteenth century music (following Mozart's footsteps around Europe) and studied at Stanford. That period of history became a passion and still is!

Q: Photos of young women in the 1940s make everyone seem so flawlessly fresh and movie-star pretty. Everybody's grandmother looked like Betty Grable or Rita Heyworth. Tell me — what was your secret?

MH: Endless primping was our secret for looking "movie-star pretty." It meant shampooing our hair in a vinegar rinse, brushing with a hundred strokes, sleeping with pin curls in our hair and cold cream slathered on our faces. Our purses held a compact to powder a shiny nose, lipstick in either red or orange (!) and combs, bandana, turban or a black-net snood to cover an imperfect hair-do. God forbid if you didn't look perfect!

Q: If you could take any one contemporary item back in time for the convenience of your 1945 self, what would it be, and why?

MH: If I could borrow any of today's creature comforts, it would be a laptop! Think of the ease of e-mailing family and friends, instant messaging a boyfriend, finding theater and bus schedules (when does the last bus leave Jones Beach?), Mapquest for exotic night spots, and know if it would rain that day!

Courtesy of www.smithmag.net

Discussion Questions

1. Marjorie Hart seems to feel only gratitude that she and her friend Marty had the opportunity to work Tiffany's in the summer of 1945. "We had to be the luckiest girls in town to be part of the Tiffany family and watch the curtain open to the toniest display of jewelry in the world." [Page 34] Based on what she tells you about herself in her book, what do you think accounts for her sunnyside-up view of life? Do you think it has to do with her generation, her small-town Midwestern background or something else?
2. Many bestselling memoirs and biographies are what Joyce Carol Oates has called "pathography," or books that focus on the pathological. Why do you think Hart was able to get *Summer at Tiffany* published when it's so different from memoirs like Augusten Burroughs's *Running With Scissors*? What makes her story enjoyable?
3. The end of World War II received more coverage than any previous event and continues to inspire books, movies, and TV shows. It also resulted in one of the most famous photographs of the century, Alfred Eisenstaedt's picture of a sailor and nurse in Times Square on V-J Day. What did *Summer at Tiffany* tell you about that event (and the days just before and after it) that you hadn't learned from other media?
4. Hart tells us up front that she has taken liberties with her story. She writes: "In some cases composite characters have been created or timelines have been compressed in order to further preserve the privacy of dear friends and maintain the narrative flow." [Page vi] Could you see evidence of this in her story? Where?
5. Using composites characters or scenes in nonfiction is controversial. Some journalists say you should never use these. Others say it's okay if a) you tell readers up front that you have done so and b) it's necessary to tell a worthy story. After reading *Summer at Tiffany*, what do you think? Did the book justify any liberties that Hart took?
6. In our era we continually hear that it's "healthy" to express your feelings, even if they might upset others. Hart grew up with different values: "It's important not to disappoint anyone, or make them worry." [Page 248] Does she seem to have suffered from this? Why or why not?
7. Do you think your parents and grandparents have the same view of this book that you would? Why or why not?
8. Some of Hart's experiences have an underside she doesn't deal with. For example, all of the women in the photo of Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority are white. Should Hart have explored these issues? Or would that have made it a different book?

9. Late in the book, Hart has to decide whether to accept a scholarship to Yale that, she says, arose suddenly. Does she give you enough information to understand why she made the choice she did? What factors seemed most important to her decision? Would you have made the same choice?
10. Hart offers vibrant glimpses of her small-town and of Manhattan in the 1940s. For example, after the *Queen Mary* brought thousands of soldiers back from Europe, the Red Cross gave out 35,000 half-pint cartons of milk because the servicemen and -women seldom had milk overseas. [Page 80] What details do you remember best? Why did they make an impression on you?
11. The caption for the last photo in the book tells us that after visiting Tiffany's in the winter of 1945, Hart didn't return until 2004. Apparently it wasn't because she couldn't afford the trip. Does it seem remarkable that she didn't go back sooner? What might explain her delayed return? Have you ever avoided going back to a place where you were happy? Why?

Courtesy of One-Minute Book Reviews