

LITERARY BOOK CLUB

September 2017 Selection

***The Orphan's Tale* by Pam Jenoff**

Sixteen-year-old Noa has been cast out in disgrace after becoming pregnant by a Nazi soldier and being forced to give up her baby. She lives above a small rail station, which she cleans in order to earn her keep. When Noa discovers a boxcar containing dozens of Jewish infants bound for a concentration camp, she is reminded of the child that was taken from her. And in a moment that will change the course of her life, she snatches one of the babies and flees into the snowy night.

Noa finds refuge with a German circus, but she must learn the flying trapeze act so she can blend in undetected, spurning the resentment of the lead aerialist, Astrid. At first rivals, Noa and Astrid soon forge a powerful bond. But as the façade that protects them proves increasingly tenuous, Noa and Astrid must decide whether their friendship is enough to save one another-or if the secrets that burn between them will destroy everything.

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Discussion Questions:

1. Noa and Astrid's rivalry changes into a close friendship despite significant differences in age and circumstances. How did this evolution happen? What do you think it was that drew them together? Have you ever found yourself in such a close but unlikely friendship?
2. Even in WWII-torn Europe, the circus was still allowed to perform. Did this surprise you? How did the setting impact your reading of the novel? What deeper meaning do you think there is behind the circus burning down in the end?

3. Who did you initially think was the narrator in the opening chapter? How did the opening chapter shape your reading experience?
4. With whom did you identify more closely, Astrid or Noa? Why? What were Noa's and Astrid's greatest strengths and their greatest flaws? Were there choices you wish Astrid and/or Noa had made differently throughout the book?
5. Noa is disowned by her family and in turn has her child ripped from her arms. Astrid leaves her family for a husband who abandons her. How do you think Astrid and Noa were each defined by their pasts? What role does the notion of family play throughout the story? What are some of the other themes in the book?
6. What do you think drew Astrid and Peter together so powerfully? Noa and Luc? How do these two relationships differ from one another? Do you think either of these relationships could have lasted a lifetime under different circumstances?
7. What do you think of Peter's decision to continue with his mocking act toward the Reich? How do you think the story would have differed if Peter had refrained from doing the act?
8. How did you feel about the ending? Were you surprised? Satisfied?
9. What will you remember the most about The Orphan's Tale?
10. Noa gives her newborn away but remains bereft by the loss and tormented by visions of the child. What do you make of her decision?
11. In her own voice, Noa tells us... "I am unfamiliar with infants and I hold him at arm's length now, like a dangerous animal. But he moves closer, nuzzling against my neck." Talk about the horror of that scene in the "nursery car" (which is historically accurate). What prompts Noa to save a half-dead?

12. What do you make of Astrid, whose voice alternates with Noa's? How has her tumultuous past shaped her character, especially in terms of her ability to trust others?
13. Talk about the development of the Noa and Astrid's relationship, on the ropes and off.
14. Author Pam Jenoff conducted considerable research into Jewish circus dynasties, which has enabled her to provide the grainy details of circus life. What do you find interesting or what, in particular, strikes you about life under the tent?
15. Talk about the symbolic use of the circus with its twinkling lights as a foil to the darkness and terror of the Nazi era.
16. What do you make of the novel's other characters—Herr Neuhoff, or Peter, for instance. In what way do they demonstrate courage in the face of danger, brutality, and evil?

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Recommendations:

- If you liked *The Orphan's Tale*, you might like *The Lilac Girls* (<http://www.booksamillion.com/p/9781101883082>)
- You might also enjoy *The Nightingale* (<http://www.booksamillion.com/p/9781250080400>)