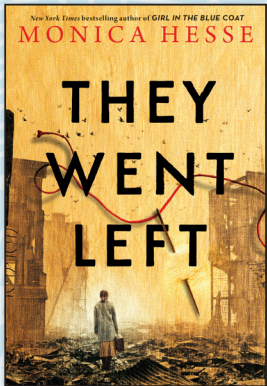


## THEY WENT LEFT MONICA HESSE



~ Book Club Pick ~

### ABOUT THE BOOK:

**Germany, 1945.** The soldiers who liberated the Gross-Rosen concentration camp said the war was over, but nothing feels over to eighteen-year-old Zofia Lederman. Her body has barely begun to heal; her mind feels broken. And her life is completely shattered: Three years ago, she and her younger brother, Abek, were the only members of their family to be sent to the right, away from the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Everyone else—her parents, her grandmother, radiant Aunt Maja—they went left.

Zofia's last words to her brother were a promise: *Abek to Zofia, A to Z. When I find you again, we will fill our alphabet.* Now, her journey to fulfill that vow takes her through Poland and Germany, and into a displaced-persons camp where everyone she meets is trying to piece together a future from a painful past: Miriam, desperately searching for the twin she was separated from after they survived medical experimentation. Breine, a former heiress, who now longs only for a simple wedding with her new fiancé. And Josef, who guards his past behind a wall of secrets, and is beautiful and strange and magnetic all at once.

But the deeper Zofia digs, the more impossible her search seems. How can she find one boy in a sea of the missing? In the rubble of a broken continent, Zofia must delve into a mystery whose answers could break her—or help her rebuild her world.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Zofia wrestles with her own memories over the course of her search for Abek. How does the Sosnowiec of Zofia's memories compare to the Sosnowiec she returns to?
2. How do physical possessions, particularly clothing, anchor Zofia and other characters to the present? To the past?
3. Zofia speaks of the "small acts of defiance" braved by people in the camps (p. 209). How do characters assert their humanity in the face of the systematic Nazi efforts to dehumanize them?
4. What role does storytelling play in preserving the legacy of survivors and their families? How do records of survivors' stories, both written and oral, inform Zofia's search for Abek?
5. Zofia suggests that "the absence of pain is not the same as the presence of happiness" (p. 198). How do survivors move forward? What moments of happiness in the face of pain does Zofia witness or experience?
6. What does family come to mean to Zofia and the other survivors she encounters? How does this definition change?
7. What do different characters do to survive both during and after the war? How do they reckon with those actions as they recover? How does survivors' guilt affect them?
8. In the aftermath of the war, what systems and forces rise up to establish order from the chaos? What are Zofia's experiences with these systems? How does Foehrenwald reflect the larger post-war state of Europe?
9. Throughout the book, Zofia references the alphabet she embroidered on the inside of Abek's coat. How do the names and places that make up this alphabet persist in Zofia's memory? How does she distinguish truth in these memories from fabrications?
10. In her author's note, Monica Hesse notes that "the war didn't end people's prejudice." What instances of anti-Semitism does Zofia encounter in her post-war journey?
11. Do you resonate with any one particular character? Why?
12. Do you see similarities between post-war Europe and our world today? How can we benefit from the knowledge of history?