Reading Group Guide

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Discussion Questions

1. In Monsieur Le Bolzec’s bookshop, Sebastian ponders his loneliness and the alienation he feels when he is ostracized by the French customers. How did this scene make you feel, reading from the perspective of the occupier versus the occupied? Did Sebastian’s sadness surprise you?
2. Later, when speaking to Monsieur Le Bolzec, Sebastian says he’s never allowed to take off his uniform. Monsieur Le Bolzec remarks that Sebastian—despite his position in the German army—is “no freer” than the French. What did you make of this observation, that Monsieur Le Bolzec and Sebastian were both prisoners in different ways?
3. Why do you think Monsieur Le Bolzec gave Sebastian a copy of The Picture of Dorian Gray to read? And what did you make of Sebastian’s comment that sooner or later, like Oscar Wilde’s famous character, the “surface is bound to crack”? What was the author foreshadowing here?
4. The author writes about the principles of Nazism, saying that based on Hitler’s teachings, there was “no room for misunderstanding, or even understanding” individual needs when it came to the well-being of the state. What do you think the author meant by this?
5. In the Sacré-Cœur Basilica in Montmartre, Sebastian thinks back to when he attended church as a child, when he was comforted by the thought of God watching over him. As a soldier, however, he felt like the likelier scenario was a reality lorded over by the Greek gods, since they enjoyed playing with people “as though they were pawns on a chessboard.” What was the author intimating here, and why do you think Sebastian felt this way at that point in his life?
6. Inside the cathedral, Sebastian looks through a stained-glass window, and meditates on the idea that God isn’t there for people like him, but for the “innocent, those looking for comfort, not reason.” Did you feel, however, that Sebastian was innocent in some ways, despite the uniform he wore? Why or why not?
7. The author discusses Hitler’s use of propaganda during World War II, noting that truth was “far less important than success” to the Third Reich when it came to communicating with the German people. How is propaganda used today, and how do you think about it in relation to something like “fake news”?
8. Sebastian and Elise’s relationship was a forbidden one, viewed as abhorrent, traitorous, and dangerous by people on both sides. Did you agree with their naysayers, or did you feel that their relationship related more strongly to the Victor Hugo epigraph at the beginning of the novel, that love is worth fighting for no matter what, as “there is no other pearl to be found in the dark folds of life”?
9. Elise, in an attempt to alleviate the shame she felt at having to live among the Nazis, helped smuggle Jewish children out of the city, putting her own life in significant risk. Even so, she feels that her help is “tiny…nothing compared to others.” Sebastian feels similarly—like he isn’t doing enough—when he burns the denunciation letter that would jeopardize the children Elise is trying to save, “watching the paper glow orange then turn to black as it disintegrated into ash.” Do you agree with Elise and Sebastian’s assessments of their work here? Or did you feel they were committing very impactful acts of rebellion?
10. In the bookshop, Monsieur Le Bolzec speaks to Elise of Sebastian: “It’s a funny thing, nationality. What does it really mean to be French? Or to be German?” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? As a translator in the German army, born to a French mother and a German father, how did this statement make you feel about Sebastian’s character? How might conflicts disappear—or, conversely, arise—with this kind of thinking?
11. Monsieur Le Bolzec tells Elise that reasons behind actions matter: “When you get to my age…you realize [that] there’s a story and then there’s the story behind it.” How did these words affect Elise going forward, and the way she interpreted Sebastian’s actions? Has Monsieur Le Bolzec’s statement rung true in your own life?
12. In times of war, do you believe that all those involved are victims—but that some victims are more innocent than others? Why or why not?
13. When Sebastian sees Josephine for the first time, he’s struck by a number of emotions: surprise, hope, confusion, happiness, wariness. Josephine had a similar experience when Elise confirmed that Frederick was not her biological father. Have you ever been in a situation where you were completely blindsided and emotionally scrambled? How did you process what happened?
14. When Josephine first travels to Paris, she is delighted by the prospect of exploring the city and all it has to offer. What is a great adventure you’ve had in your own life, and how did it impact you going forward?
15. Sebastian makes a very difficult decision at the end of the novel. Do you feel he made the right choice? Ultimately, how did the ending of the book make you feel?