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By Howard Jacobson

First published 2014

Genre & subject

Man-woman relationships fiction

Dystopias

Man Booker Prize Nominee (2014)

Goldsmiths Prize Nominee (2014)

Jewish Quarterly-Wingate Prize Nominee (2016)

Synopsis

What country isn't a charnel house of its own history? Two people fall in love in a world where the past is a dangerous country, not to be talked about or visited. As they discover where they came from and where they are going, a bigger, more shattering truth is revealed to them. It wasn't then, and isn't now, the time or place for asking questions. Ailinn, too, has grown up in the dark about whom she was and where she came from. They aren't sure whether they have fallen in love of their own accord or whether they've been pushed into each other's arms. But who would have pushed them, and why? Hanging over all the lives of everyone in this novel is a momentous catastrophe - a past event shrouded in suspicion, denial and apology, now referred to as 'What happened', if it happened.

Author biography

Howard Eric Jacobson (born 25 August 1942) is a British novelist and journalist. He is known for writing comic novels that often revolve around the dilemmas of British Jewish characters. He is a Man Booker Prize winner.

Jacobson has been married three times. He married his first wife Barbara in 1964 after graduating, when he was 22. In late 1964, Howard and Barbara immigrated to Australia where Jacobson took up a lectureship at Sydney University. They returned to Manchester in 1967, living there briefly before moving to London where their son was born.

This was followed by Howard teaching at Selwyn College, Cambridge. Jacobson returned to Australia when his son was three years old. He remained without a teaching post. Jacobson eventually returned to the UK after several years. Barbara divorced him in his absence.

He married his second wife, Rosalin Sadler, in 1978; they divorced in 1995. In 2005, Jacobson was married for the third time, to radio and TV documentary maker Jenny De Yong. He stated, "My last wife. I'm home, it's right".

Discussion starters

- How did you experience the book? Were you engaged immediately, or did it take you a while to "get into it"? How did you feel reading it—amused, sad, disturbed, confused, bored?
- Describe the main characters—personality traits, motivations, and inner qualities. Why do characters do what they do? Are their actions justified? Describe the dynamics between characters (in a marriage, family, or friendship). How has the past shaped their lives? Do you admire or disapprove of them?
- Discuss the plot: Is it engaging—do you find the story interesting? Were you surprised by complications, twists & turns? Did you find the plot predictable, even formulaic?
- Talk about the book's structure. Does the time-line move forward chronologically? Is there a single viewpoint or shifting viewpoints? Why might the author have chosen to tell the story the way she did?
- What main ideas—themes—does the author explore? (Consider the title, often a clue to a theme.) Does the author use symbols to reinforce the main ideas?
- What passages strike you as insightful, even profound? Perhaps a bit of dialog that's funny or poignant or that encapsulates a character? Maybe there's a particular comment that states the book's thematic concerns?
- Is the ending satisfying? If so, why? If not, why not...and how would you change it?
- If you could ask the author a question, what would you ask? Have you read other books by the same author? If so how does this book compare. If not, does this book inspire you to read others?
- Has this novel changed you—broadened your perspective? Have you learned something new or been exposed to different ideas about people or a certain part of the world?

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