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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

The Soldier's Wife
by
Margaret Leroy
(New York: Hyperion/Voice, 2011)

Author: Margaret Leroy has written five previous novels, including *Postcards from Berlin*, a *New York Times* Notable Book, and *Yes, My Darling Daughter*, which was chosen for the Oprah Summer Reading List. She is married with two children and lives in London. [From hyperionbooks.com]

Summary: The de la Mare household, filled entirely with women, is not unlike many households on the tiny British island of Guernsey during World War II, where most men have left to join the army in its fight against the encroaching German forces. Vivienne feels little difference, however, in her husband Eugene's absence from the life they lived when he resided at home as she raises their two daughters and cares for her ailing mother-in-law. He may have slept in the same bed, but the distance between them, then, was just as great.

Her life does change, though, when the Germans bomb their island and then occupy it, building work camps for prisoners of war and taking up residence in the homes abandoned by Guernsey citizens who fled. The house next door to Vivienne's becomes one such German residence, and when several soldiers of the German army begin living there, including one tall, intriguing man with a long pink scar on his face, Vivienne is forced to negotiate a new life fraught with new rules, new faces, and a dangerous but fulfilling new love.

An intricate historical novel that moves deftly between mystery and romance, *The Soldier's Wife* depicts domestic and military life—and the horrors of war—with poetic, evocative prose. Margaret Leroy's book about a woman whose unassuming life is irrevocably changed by war is a quiet meditation on bravery, compassion, and the resilience of human nature. [From hyperionbooks.com]

Questions:

1. The book opens with Vivienne reading fairy tales to her younger daughter, Millie. Discuss the ways in which *The Soldier's Wife* is like a fairy tale, as well as the important ways in which it is not. Discuss, too, the running motif of fairy tales throughout the book, including what Vivienne reads to Millie out of Angie's book of Guernsey stories. Is Leroy using the fairy tales as symbols, or metaphors, or as a way

of constructing a thematic statement for the book? (Or, perhaps, all three?)

2. Consider the ways the setting of *The Soldier's Wife* is used as a literary device. Discuss scenes where the landscape foreshadows events or parallels the moods of the characters (in particular, Vivienne).
3. How effectively do you think Leroy portrayed life on the island of Guernsey during its occupation by the Germans in World War II? In particular, discuss the extent to which she depicted the bombing of the harbor, the gradual decline into poverty and resourcefulness of the island's inhabitants, and the strained and complex relationships between the German soldiers and the British citizens.
4. Because most of the British men from Guernsey were enlisted as soldiers in the war, a majority of the characters in this book are women. Discuss the ways in which the author writes about women during wartime, focusing in particular on Angie, Gwen, Blanche, Vivienne, and Evelyn.
5. Similarly, consider—by way of the book's characters—how the different generations were affected by the war: Millie and Simon's innocent youth, Blanche and Johnnie's emerging adulthood, Vivienne and Gunther's duty-torn middle age, and Evelyn's advanced (and afflicted) years. In what ways did each generation suffer because of the war, and in what ways were they changed, perhaps, for the better?
6. Comment on Vivienne's honest appraisal of her marriage early in the novel, before her relationship with Gunther begins. What does it say about her that she never confronted Eugene about his mistress? Do you think that she would have returned to her marriage after the war with the same practical resignation?
7. Some of the less developed characters in the novel are interesting nonetheless. Discuss the roles Gwen, Angie, Max, and Johnnie play in the book and in Vivienne's life. How does each character teach her something, or reveal something, about which she would otherwise remain in the dark? How do her relationships with these characters change, and change her, over the course of the story?
8. Discuss Kirill and his role in the novel, too. When Millie began speaking about the "white ghost" in the barn, did you suspect she was talking about a man from the work camp? What did you think had happened to him the first time he disappeared? In what ways was he responsible for a change in Vivienne, particularly as a character in opposition to Gunther, a man who was also responsible for significant change in Vivienne?
9. When Vivienne broke off her relationship with Gunther, what did you believe? Did you believe that Gunther had reported Vivienne for housing Kirill? What did you think of Max's revelation to Vivienne that Hermann had died, and then, at the end of the book, that Gunther had not been responsible for Kirill's death? Do you think Vivienne blamed Gunther for Kirill's death before this, or did it matter to her? How

much did Vivienne hold Gunther responsible for his actions as a German soldier?

10. Gunther and Vivienne were both marked by the death of a parent—Vivienne, her mother, and Gunther, his father. What other similarities, particularly of character, did they share? What made them such an ideal match? Had the war ended while Gunther was still on Guernsey, what might have happened to them? Would their fairy tale have had a happy ending?
11. In what ways is Vivienne a memorable heroine? What character trait did you find most interesting about her? What made you like her (or, possibly, dislike her) in particular?
12. Compare this book to other works of historical fiction that you have read. What are its biggest strengths? What makes it different from other historical novels? Did it change, in any way, your perspective of life in Europe during World War II? What can be learned from these characters and their particular situation that can be useful in contemporary society, even in the United States?

[From hyperionbooks.com]