

In Reading Groups

Book Discussion Guide from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship

by Jacque Stouffer



Everyone Brave is Forgiven

by Chris Cleave

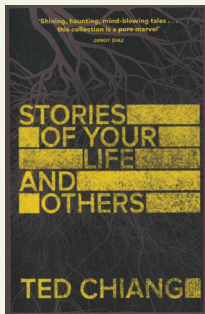
An insightful, stark, and heartbreaking story about three lives entangled during World War II. Based loosely on his own grandparents, Cleave's novel portrays the irrepressible hopefulness that can arise in the face of catastrophe.

1. What did you think of the book's beginning. Was it an easy story for you to sink into, or did it take you a bit to get started? Why?
2. Why do you think the author introduced Zachary so early in the story – and maintained his character as central to the book?
3. How does Zachary help you understand Mary?
4. On page 11, Mary thinks "... the only difference between children and adults was that children were prepared to put twice the energy into the project of not being sad." How does this belief hold true as the war progresses?
5. What was your original opinion of Tom and Alistair – as individuals, and as friends? How did your perception of these two characters change throughout the book?
6. Did you want Mary to end up with Tom or Alistair?
7. "Alone in his mind each man knew himself free as a king, while the King alone knew himself enslaved (135)." Alistair has this thought while waiting in the doctor's office. Do you agree? Why or why not?
8. What role does Hilda play in this story? How does her character support or detract from the story?
9. Why do you think Mary and Hilda were friends?
10. Can you not just picture Palmer?! How would the story be different without him?
11. "One could always imagine that one's life, though smoldering in parts, might be undamaged in the west (180)." How does the geographic area of bomb damage in London symbolize the socio-economic differences between this story's central characters?
12. A few minor characters are introduced throughout the story in relationship to Alistair (Duggan, Simonson, Briggs). Why do you think they are brought into the story at their designated time? Do they move the plot? How do they define and shape Alistair?
13. The title of the book shows up in Mary's first letter to Alistair. "I was brought up to believe that everyone brave is forgiven, but in wartime courage is cheap and clemency out of season (245)." What do you think Mary means by this statement? Why do you think Cleave chose this for the title of the book?
14. Do you believe all can be forgiven if one is brave? Why?
15. Mary and Hilda start the war by taking a taxi east to observe the damage. Later, they find themselves in its midst, on ambulance duty. Mary says "We visit by night and we fly west at dawn. We are ghouls, I'm afraid. We are monsters (267)." Do you agree ... are they monsters? And how are we similar today, with our observation of and attention to damage?

16. The letters between Mary and Alistair end up peppered with teasing insults, humor, and sarcasm. How does this advance their relationship? How does it buoy Alistair in particular?
17. Does the budding relationship between Simonson and Hilda work for you? Did you find it contrived or natural? Does it leave you with hope?
18. Without an actual word count, my perception is that Tom's portion of the story is much smaller than Mary's or Alistair's. The reader knows less about his personal experience with the war – at least from his perspective. Why do you think that is? Is he necessary to the story only in that he's the connection between Mary and Alistair, or does he serve another purpose?
19. What do you think of the ending ... of Mary and Alistair's eventual meeting and the true start of their relationship?
20. What, if anything, did you learn about World War II from this book that you had not heard previously? Does it make you want to know more?

Jacque Stouffer lives with her family in Liberty, Missouri, where she works with nonprofit agencies as a specialist in organized fundraising through communication and grant writing.

NEXT MONTH



Stories of Your Life and Others by Ted Chiang

This collection of science fiction stories often presents characters who must confront sudden change with some sense of normalcy. Chiang examines what it means to be alive in a world marked by uncertainty, but also by beauty and wonder.