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READING GROUP GUIDE

WHEN WE
WERE YOUNG

JACLYN GOLDIS



FOREVER

Dear Reader:

The first sparks of my idea for this novel came on a trip to Jamaica in 2015. On the beach one day, I watched two kids from different families and places playing happily together. I thought about the magic of vacation friends and romances. There is something different and special about exiting your everyday life that alters the relationships developed with people you meet on your travels. And so Joey and Leo were borne.

If you ask me to vote for the beach or the mountains, I, like Joey, would choose the beach a thousand times over. I feel happiest when next to or in water. I grew up on a lake in Michigan and now live in Tel Aviv, mere steps from the Mediterranean Sea. And so, in choosing the novel's setting, the island aspect of Corfu appealed to me immensely, from Corfu Town's pebbled city beaches nestled in tiny coves to the western coast's endless, spectacular caramel sand beaches leading to an impossibly turquoise sea.

Continuing on the beach motif, I decided to set the remainder of the book in South Florida. Aside from its sunny ambience, I've spent a lot of time there, so it is like a second home. My maternal grandmother, with whom I share a closeness like that between Joey and Sarah, lives in Delray Beach.

And finally, I mined my own experience for Joey's unlikely career transition. Like Joey, I was a lawyer at a large

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law firm, and I quit my job the year I'd go up for partnership to travel and work on creative pursuits. (Although, unlike Joey, the firm I worked at was wonderful and the people I worked with even more so.)

Joey isn't me, of course, but so much of me is in this book. As a writer, the delight I find in fiction is in collecting the truest things I know and shapeshifting them into a story. I feel privileged you chose to read mine.

Jaclyn Goldis

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. One of the inspirations for the novel was the author seeing two kids meet and become friends on vacation. Have you ever connected with someone on vacation, or outside your everyday life, as friends or romantic partners? How do you think that experience went differently than it would have had it originated amid your everyday life?
2. A theme in the novel is the trauma of “postmemory,” that is, how later generations bear the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those generations who came before. How does this theme play out in the novel? How are both Bea and Joey affected by what Sarah and Sam endured?
3. Even years after the fact, Joey struggles to find closure to her relationship with Leo. Was it selfish for her to agree to meet with Leo eleven days before her wedding? How have you experienced closure in a relationship? Did the time it took or way it happened surprise you?
4. Why do you think Joey switched from art to law after Leo broke up with her? Have you ever given up on a passion? What would it take for you to revisit it?

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5. Sarah must live her entire life with regrets that were impossible to make right. Why was it easier for Sarah to marry a man she didn't love than the man she did? Do you think that even after communicating with Milos, she will ever fully forgive herself?
6. Many characters in the novel are holding on to secrets they eventually reveal. Are secrets in a relationship ever justified?
7. Bea is in many ways an unlikable character. On page 162, she says, "Maybe sometimes you have to risk hurting people you love in order to be happy." Do you agree with her? In what circumstances would you find the statement valid? How does your view of Bea change as the book progresses? Do you think that Joey ultimately finds more compassion for her mother after she leaves Grant for Leo?
8. On page 43, Joey says that with Leo love felt like falling, but with Grant she learned to love on solid ground. Do you think that love can be divided into these two categories? Which have you experienced in your life? Do you think it is possible for Joey to love on solid ground with Leo too?
9. Neither Bea nor Joey was born on Corfu, but nonetheless the island becomes a central facet of their lives. How does the way each of Joey, Bea, and Sarah feels about Corfu change with the events of their lives and the events of the novel? Do you think that any or all of

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the women would choose to return to Corfu for a visit after the events of the novel? Have you ever considered a place not your birthplace or home as nonetheless important in your life? Perhaps it is a vacation spot or a place where a family member lives or lived. How did that place become important to you? Have your feelings toward that place changed with time or events?

10. Family history plays a critical role in the plot. How is Joey affected by her mother's and grandmother's paths? Do you know your family history? How does it affect your life? Does it cause you to try to follow your ancestors' lead or take a different path?
11. The concept of forgiveness percolates throughout the novel. Do Bea and Scott deserve Joey's forgiveness? Do you think she has truly forgiven them? Does Bea deserve Sarah's forgiveness for not passing along the message from Milos? Do you think Sarah has truly forgiven her daughter? Is it easier for a parent to forgive a child or for a child to forgive a parent? Why?
12. Were you glad Joey chose Leo? Do you think Grant would have been the better choice? Why or why not?
13. Where do you see Joey five years in the future?

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HISTORICAL NOTE

I knew I wanted to write a novel with multiple generations harboring secrets. My father is a Soviet emigrant, and when I was growing up, he never really spoke about his first twenty-eight years before he immigrated to the US. But in my early thirties, my family traveled to my dad's hometown in Ukraine, his first time back since he'd left, and he finally told us his stories. I wanted the protagonist—Joey—to transform, as I did, as she understands the history of her ancestors.

My paternal grandmother escaped Ukraine when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in 1941. But her parents and some other family members did not manage to escape, and were murdered by the Nazis and buried in mass graves in the rural outskirts of Zhitomir, a small city a few hours from Kiev. I am named after this paternal grandmother, and I feel very connected to her, despite never meeting her as she died shortly before I was born. I wanted to write a grandmother character loosely inspired by her, someone who narrowly escaped the Holocaust but was greatly impacted by it.

HISTORICAL NOTE

I chose to partially set the novel on Corfu because of its lesser-known Holocaust history, and also its island and European appeal. Initially, I spent a few weeks in Greece doing research, including on Corfu, and I met with an expert in Athens on Greek Jewish history. And then over the course of a few years, I read everything I could get my hands on regarding the Corfiot Jews, and I met with and spoke to many people with personal Greek Jewish stories, as well as further experts on Greek Jewish history. Many of them told me, “The world doesn’t even know what happened to the Greek Jews during the Holocaust. Our stories have largely been ignored.”

I am so grateful to the kind and generous people who shared insights and stories, often painfully tragic. All of it was invaluable to an accurate portrayal of what life was like for the Corfiot Jews in the forties, prior to, during, and after Nazi rule.

The story of Sarah and her family is fictional, but it is interwoven with many real stories and events of the time. For instance, Rabbi Iakov Nechama was once the rabbi of Corfu, and how the Nazis dehumanized him during their rule is historically accurate.

And Costas, who is Sarah’s customer on the island of Lefkada, is a fictionalized character based upon Costas Stagiannos, a member of Lefkada Resistance, who courageously aided the escape of some Corfiot Jews imprisoned on Lefkada.

The scene where the Jews of Corfu are imprisoned on Lefkada is rooted in fact. Many of the Corfiot Jews did indeed pass through Lefkada on their deportation to Auschwitz, and many of the townspeople of Lefkada, putting their own lives at risk, bravely tried to help the Corfiot Jews. Pope

HISTORICAL NOTE

Dimitris Thomatzidis attempted to give a cigarette across the fence to a Jew named Daniel Johanna, for which the pope was injured by a Nazi soldier. Daniel, the Jew who accepted the cigarette, was then murdered by a Nazi soldier. And subsequently, a Nazi soldier also injured (and possibly even murdered, according to differing sources) two or three more Jews standing nearby. All of these events are depicted as accurately as possible in the backdrop of the scene in which Sarah sees her family for the very last time.

Before the war, there were about two thousand Jews of Corfu. During the Nazi rule, two hundred Corfiot Jews managed to escape and/or find refuge with Christian families. On June 14, 1944, the other eighteen hundred Corfiot Jews were deported to Auschwitz, where all but about a hundred perished.

It has been an honor to pay tribute to the Jews of Corfu, whose stories have thus far been little told.