

THE LIVES BEFORE US – Discussion Questions

Please Note: These Discussion Questions do contain spoilers. Please wait to look over the questions until after you've finished reading the novel.

Esther and Kitty survived gruelling times in Shanghai. How did these experiences change them? What impact might these experiences have on their future lives?

Anneliese was a child during her time in Shanghai. Do you think a child might process these experiences differently? Would it be easier, or more difficult, for Anni to adapt to a 'normal' life afterwards?

Did the characters seem believable to you? Were their thoughts and actions period-specific (i.e. 1940s), or do people behave the same way in the 21st century?

What is your take on Esther and Aaron's relationship? Is Aaron a 'villain', or was it the struggle for survival that brought out a certain ruthlessness and desperation in him?

What makes Kitty and Timothy's friendship so special? How do you imagine their relationship moving forward?

How central was Wing's character to the novel? Is there anything more you would have liked to know about him? How did you feel about his fate?

Which character in the book would you most like to meet?

Did you think the author brought 1940's Shanghai to life? Is Shanghai a city you think you might like to visit? (Author's note: Please do! It's a fascinating place!)

Lack of food, poor housing conditions, poverty, illness, fear – desperate times can bring out the best and also the worst in people. How do you imagine you might cope in such a situation? And how important is a sense of community in such circumstances?

Like Esther's parents, many German Jews decided to stay in Germany despite the encroaching threat from the Nazis. Can you understand why?

Can you see any similarities between the situation of the Jewish refugees from the 1930s and 40s, and that of refugees arriving in Europe today?

How did you feel about the ending? Was it satisfying, or was anything left unresolved? What do you wish had been different?

What do you think will be your lasting impression of the book? What will be your most vivid memories of it a year from now? Or will it just leave a vague impression, and what will that be?

If the book were being adapted into a film, who would you want to see play which parts?

Thank you for reading and discussing *THE LIVES BEFORE US*!

If you enjoyed the book, please consider leaving a review, e.g. on Amazon or Goodreads.

Reader reviews matter!