

The Child at the Window

Questions for Reading Groups

1. Which sister (Jo or Con) did you empathise with most, and why?
2. Why do you think the sisters are so captivated by opera?
3. Do you think Ilse was brave or foolhardy to write her article on the Sachsenhausen camp?
4. In chapter 50 (p. 367), Edward asks Jo to make up replies to dead letters written by parents to their soldier sons, believing them to be alive, when in fact they are already dead. According to Edward, if Jo can convince people their sons have deserted to neutral countries, word will get round and other soldiers will be tempted to desert too. Do you think Jo was right to refuse to write the letters?
5. Are there any other aspects of 'black propaganda' that you find unacceptable, or, as Edward says, is all really 'fair in love and war'?
6. After Esther runs away from school, Jo and Con worry that they aren't very good 'mothers'. Do you think this is the case?
7. In chapter 55, Jo turns down Edward's second proposal. Do you think she makes the right decision?
8. Which is your favourite scene in the novel, and why?
9. Did you find the ending satisfying?
10. Who is your favourite character in the novel, and why?
11. In the epilogue, Esther says she's learned from Ilse, Jo and Con, 'the different facets of motherhood'. What varying parenting styles do the novel's characters demonstrate?
12. In her Author's Note, Gill Thompson writes, 'Technology may evolve, but no machine can replace that most human of arts – the ability to weave fiction that entertains, moves and enthrals.' How do you think artificial intelligence will affect novel writing?



'Serendipity'

A letter from Gill Thompson

As a writer of historical fiction, I like to think I'm scrupulous in my research. My novels take place in and around the Second World War, and since some of my readers still remember that conflict, they'd be quick to point out any inaccuracies. Any story set in the past must feel both authentic and plausible in its historical detail.

Sometimes, though, a previously undiscovered fact emerges – one that makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. Such was the case with my fifth novel, *The Child at the Window*.

The child of the title is Esther, a little girl separated from her mother in the cruellest way. The Gestapo raid their home, and Ilse, a journalist who dared to write critically about the Nazis, is thrown into prison. Esther is distraught. Though the two remain apart, they are sustained by a ritual established when Esther was very young: whenever they see Venus – the morning and evening star – they think of each other. This small act of remembrance becomes their lifeline. It comforts Ilse as she endures a concentration camp, and gives Esther strength when she's evacuated to England to live with relative strangers.

I won't reveal any spoilers, but there's a reunion of sorts in Berlin in 1945. While researching a setting for a significant meeting, I went looking for a restaurant that had existed at the time, and was thrilled to discover one called *Zum Gulden Stern* – 'The Guiding Star'. How wonderfully appropriate.

But the true stroke of serendipity came while I was researching opera. Alongside Esther and Ilse's story, my novel also follows two sisters whose passion for opera in the 1930s brings them into contact with Jewish musicians. These musicians ask for their help in smuggling valuables out of Germany to fund their escape to England. I named my sisters Josephine and Constance Elliot, though they are inspired by the real-life Cook sisters – Ida and Louise – devoted opera lovers who rescued twenty-nine Jewish people before the war.

In my story, Jo and Con care for Esther. After she narrowly survives a bombing raid, they decide to home-school her, enlisting other refugees as teachers.

A singer teaches her French using the lyrics of Berlioz, and I found these lines from his song cycle *Les Nuits d'été* especially poignant:

*Même de loin, ma mère me défend,
et ce baiser qu'elle m'envoie
écarte le péril.*

Roughly translated, the lines mean: 'Even from far away my mother defends me, and this kiss she sends wards off danger.' Another powerful link between Esther and Ilse.

But I've saved the best until last. After the war, I have Esther, Jo and Con attend an opera in Berlin. The sisters are overjoyed to listen to live music again – and honoured to share the experience with Esther. In searching for a performance that took place at the time, I discovered that Beethoven's work *Fidelio* was staged at the *Theater des Westens* in September 1945. The choice could not have been more symbolic: it was performed in the only undamaged theatre in Berlin and celebrated freedom and triumph over oppression.

Its anti-tyrant theme isn't lost on the sisters, nor, I hope, my readers. A wife disguises herself to rescue her wrongfully imprisoned husband, determined to save him from execution. When I read the English translation of one of her arias, I could hardly believe the words:

*Come, hope, let not the last bright star
In my anguish be obscured!
Light up my goal, however far,
Through love I shall still reach it.*

What a gift to a writer telling a story about how a 'bright star' unites a mother and daughter.

In my novel, I have Esther cry when she hears those words. Whenever I revisit that passage, I'm blinking back the tears too. For those who lived through the war, *Fidelio's* message must have struck deeply: that good can triumph over evil, and tyranny can be defeated. For my characters, the 'bright star' that connects those so cruelly separated becomes a symbol of hope in the darkness.

That, truly, is serendipity in action.

- Gill Thompson