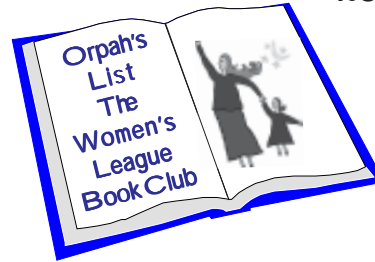


2006 Selection



**Study Guide for
Those Who Save Us
by Jenna Blum**

When Professor Trudy Swenson finds a portrait of herself as a small child, her mother and a Nazi officer hidden away in her mother's drawer in their Minnesota farmhouse, she embarks upon the painful path of understanding the cause of her mother's cold silence. As the story weaves back and forth from the Third Reich to modern America, author Jenna Blum's riveting tale asks us what we would sacrifice in order to survive.



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Dear Sisterhood Readers,

Welcome to my first novel, *Those Who Save Us*. I'm so delighted it has made its way to you! The number one question readers ask me is, "Where did you get the idea for this book?" This is tough to answer since like most novels, *Those Who Save Us* was born from a constellation of impulses and experiences.

The first experience is my "schizophrenic" heritage: my mother is part German and my father was Jewish, and I was steeped in an awareness of the Holocaust from a very early age. I remember asking my parents, after reading a children's book called *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*, "Why were the Nazis so mean to the Jews?" Neither could give me a satisfactory answer, if one exists. I also asked my father whether any of our family had been murdered by Nazis; the most information he had was that two great-aunts were killed at Babi Yar. When history is lost, imagination steps in.

Then, in 1993, my mother wanted to take me to Germany. I was underwhelmed. There were so many other places to visit—countries that hadn't slaughtered six million Jews. But my mother wanted to investigate her own heritage and it was useless to argue. So off to Germany we went, and over every meal, during every drive, in every hotel, we asked, "What would you have done during the war?" As a *mischling*, a half-breed, I would have been sent with my father to the camps. But my Aryan mother would have faced the same choices as my heroine in the novel. It was on the road from Buchenwald to Weimar that Anna came to me: an ordinary woman forced by a crucible of circumstance to make terrible decisions.

When I returned, I immediately began researching *Those Who Save Us*. I read everything I could about the period, listened to German composers, took language classes, watched documentaries, revisited Germany three times (with my mother). I baked every dish that appears in the novel, and I'll confess I even wore my hair in braids for a short spell. My most important research, though, was interviewing Jewish survivors for Steven Spielberg's *Survivors of the Shoah* Foundation. I was privileged to be an interviewer for five years, in the Minneapolis area, where I then lived. And although I did not use any of their stories—believing they are earned at a cost the rest of us can only imagine—their experiences helped inform the emotional atmosphere of the novel. I am eternally indebted to them.

And I'm indebted to you for reading *Those Who Save Us*. It's a miracle to me that, because I loved and believed in my characters and their stories, my writing telegraphs to readers' heads and comes alive. On behalf of my characters, the survivors whom this book honors, and myself, I thank you and wish you engaging reading.

JENNA BLUM
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Theme I – Forbidden Relationships

Leader: Forbidden relationships is a principle theme of author, Jenna Blum's first novel. As a historical backdrop to this issue, discuss briefly the Nuremberg Laws below.

Historical Note: The Nuremberg Laws, passed by the Nazi government in September 1935, were the first state-sponsored anti-Jewish legislation, marking the revocation of full citizenship that had been granted to all German Jews in 1871.

Among the statutes were prohibitions against marriages between Jews and Aryans, sexual relations of any kind between Jews and Aryans, and Aryan women under the age of 45 employed as domestic workers in Jewish homes.

Leader: One of the clear intentions of the Nuremberg Laws was to prevent the mixing of "races" through the control of sexuality. After 1935, sexual unions between Jews and non-Jews were forbidden.

Leader: We read in the following narration:

Anna has no excuse whatever to visit a Jewish physician; in fact it is, as the Doktor himself has reminded her, forbidden. Not that Anna has ever paid much attention to such things. (page 18)

Discussion Question: The forbidden relationship between Anna and Max is the first of many in the story. What is forbidden about each of the following?

Anna/Max, Anna/the *Obersturmführer*, Anna/Jack, Trudy/Rainer

Discussion Question: To what degree is the forbidden-ness of these relationships imposed by the outside, and how much is internal? Are there more forbidden relationships in the story?

Topic II – Female Relationships

Discussion Question: How would you describe the women in the story: Anna, Trudie, Mathilde?

Which of the following characterizations do you think apply to each of them: rebel, hero, friend, maternal, victim?

What other categories can you suggest to describe one or all of them?

How much of their individual experiences is due to the fact that they are women?

Leader: In a conversation Mathilde says to Anna:

Ach, Anna you wouldn't understand. A pretty girl like you, you must have had ten proposals before you were sixteen. But a woman who looks like me, she has to take what she can get. My Fritzi married me for the bakery....He never loved me, not really, not like your Max loved you. (page 139)

Might this be characterized as “girl talk”? What does this conversation reveal about these two women?

Discussion Question: Do you think that Anna could/would have become a “Bakery Angel” with Mathilde’s influence?

In what ways did Mathilde’s death affect Anna?

Discussion Question: How would you describe Trudy’s relationship with Ruth Liebowitz (director of Holocaust Studies at the university)? Do you see any similarities to Anna and Mathilde’s relationship?

Topic III – Keeping Secrets

Leader: Another key theme of the story is secret relationships and secret behavior. Anna says to Trudie:

“Be quiet...Do you want Jack to hear you? Now I will tell you something very important. You must never say such things in this house. You must never speak of that man at all. You must never think of him. Never. Do you understand? (page 437)”

She is authorizing (and instructing) her daughter that certain things must be kept concealed. She is also forbidding her to discuss it ever again, even with her own mother.

Discussion Questions: What do you think still causes Anna’s silence?

What affect does Anna’s silence have on her relationship with her daughter?

Topic IV – Survival

Leader: We are all familiar with stories of survival from war. Let’s look at the following (and one of the most famous) Holocaust memoirs.

Three days after the liberation of Buchenwald, I became very ill with food poisoning. I was transferred to the hospital and spent two weeks between life and death. One day I was able to get up, after gathering all my strength. I had not seen myself [since] I was deported from the ghetto to the concentration camp]. From the depths of the mirror, a corpse gazed back at me. The look in his eyes, as they stared into mine, has never left me. Elie Wiesel, Night

Leader: Survivors of the Holocaust speak about their feelings of abject terror, isolation and doom. The ability to survive depended on a number of factors: geographic location, age, strength, and mostly, luck.

Anna’s story is also one of survival. What factors contributed to her survival?

Do you think she would have behaved in the same way if she did not have Trudie?

Discussion Questions: Was survival a justification for Anna’s relationship with the *Obersturmfuhrer*?

Does your answer change if you are considering Anna by herself, or Anna with a child?

Do you think that mothers can or should do anything to protect their children? If so, does that mean that she should not harbor a sense of guilt about her behavior?

When Anna looked at herself in the mirror at the end of the war, what look do you suppose she saw in her eyes?

Topic V - Shame

Leader: Shame is a powerful force in this story. Trudy learns about shame from Anna.

How does this shame manifest itself when Trudy is an adult?

How does Trudy deal with *her* shame?

Trudy tells Anna that she is teaching a seminar called “Women’s Roles in Nazi Germany”:

“I see,” Anna repeats. She says nothing further, but the way she looks at Trudy causes Trudy to feel a scalding, primal shame the likes of which she has not experienced since childhood... ‘I take it you don’t approve’... Anna gives a little shrug, as if the matter is of no consequence to her. But the skin around her nostrils has blanched, as it always does when she is angry or upset. ‘You know my view on such things’, she says. ‘Yes...says Trudy, and recites: The past is dead.’”

Discussion Question: What is the source of Trudy’s suffering: shame with her mother’s behavior during the war, or her mother’s silence on the subject– or both?

Discussion Question: With which character can you sympathize the most?

Discussion Questions from the Publisher and Author

Q: How would you categorize *Those Who Save Us* as a war story, a love story, a mother-daughter story? Why? How is it different from other novels that address the issues surrounding the Holocaust? What new perspectives does it offer?

Q: Discuss the novel’s title, *Those Who Save Us*. In what ways do the characters save each other in the novel, and who saves whom? How does Blum play with the concept of being saved, being safe, being a savior?

Q: In the beginning of the novel, what is Anna’s attitude toward the Jewish people of Weimar? Does her attitude change? If so, where does this transformation occur and why?

Q: While she is hiding Max, Anna thinks she would “pay a high price to be plain, for her looks pose an ever-greater danger to both herself and Max.” Do you see Anna’s beauty as a blessing or a curse? What role does it play in shaping her destiny? How do her looks affect her relationships with Max, Gerhard, the Obersturmführer, Trudy?

Q: When living with Mathilde, Anna asks why Mathilde risks her life to feed the Buchenwald prisoners “when everyone else turn a blind eye.” Why does Mathilde take this risk? Why does Anna? Do you think American women would react differently than German women in similar circumstances, and if so, why?

Q: What are Anna’s sexual reactions to the Obersturmführer, and what effect do they have on how she sees herself? How do they shape Anna’s relationship with Trudy?

Do you see Anna’s relationship with the Obersturmführer as primarily sexual, or are there places in the novel where their relationship transcends the sexual?

Q: Do you see the Obersturmführer as a monster or as human? What are his vulnerabilities? To what degree is he a product of his time? If the Obersturmführer had been born in contemporary America, what might he be doing today?

Q: Toward the end of the novel, Anna thinks that the Obersturmführer “has blighted her ability to love.” Do you think he has forever affected her ability to love Jack? To love Trudy? What are Anna’s real feelings for the Obersturmführer, and what are his true feelings toward Anna and her daughter?

Q: Are Trudy’s difficulties with her mother caused only by the secrets Anna keeps? If the past had not come between them, what would their relationship have been like? In what ways are Trudy and Anna typical of mothers and daughters everywhere? What parallels can you draw between their relationship and yours with your own mother?

Q: Anna’s consistent response to Trudy’s questions is, “The past is dead, and better it remain so.” Why does Anna keep her silence? Is

this fair to Trudy? Were you surprised that Anna refuses to talk about her past even when she has been confronted and deemed a heroine by Mr. Pfeffer? In her position, would you do the same?

Q: During his German Project interview, Rainer plays what he calls “a dirty trick” on Trudy by reading a prepared statement about his aunt’s experience and eventual deportation to Auschwitz instead of telling his own story. Why does he do this? Why is Rainer so angry with Trudy? Is he angry with her? Do you think his anger is justified?

Q: Why does Trudy get involved with Rainer? Is Trudy and Rainer’s relationship a healthy one? When Rainer departs for Florida, he says, “I do not deserve this . . . I am not meant to be this happy,” a statement with which Trudy agrees. If Trudy and Rainer’s relationship were not affected by their wartime pasts, would it have been happy? Would it have existed at all?

Q: What does each of Trudy’s interview subjects—Frau Kluge, Rose-Grete Fischer, Rainer, Felix Pfeffer—represent about German actions during the war and how Germans feel in retrospect? What does Trudy learn from her German subjects?

Q: At the end of *Those Who Save Us*, the characters’ fates are ambiguous; Trudy, for instance, is left in a “vacuum between one part of life ending and another coming to take its place.” Why does Blum do this? What statement, if any, is she trying to make? Do you feel that the novel’s end is a happy one for Trudy? For Anna? Why or why not? And what do you think has happened to the Obersturmführer?