



SPINNING AT THE EDGES

A Novel

Reading Group Guide

1. How does the title relate to the story? How many ways are characters “spinning”? How many different kinds of edges does the novel encompass?
2. The novel explores intergenerational trauma through several story lines. In which story lines do you see this theme at play, and how are characters affected by it?
3. In what ways are the characters in the 2000-01 time period of the novel isolated? How has that isolation impacted them? What happens when they find some community and how do they find it, if they do. In what way(s) is the Jewish community in Amsterdam in 1941 isolated?
4. On page 20, while Stephanie Pearl and Rona Adler skate at the rink in Wheaton, MD, Rona relates to Stephanie a dream she has had of her mother’s early life. Why does Stephanie become envious of Rona’s ability to have this dream? What other characteristics of Rona’s relationship with her mother trigger envy in Stephanie, and why? Do you see Rona making any personal sacrifices (consciously or not) in the interest of caring for her mother? Do you see Stephanie doing that?
5. Ruth Pearl reads the legal decision of the Florida Supreme Court, *Gore v. Harris*, and is heartened by its reasoning which she quotes to Stephanie: “The right to vote is the right to participate; it is also the right to speak, but more importantly the right to be heard.” Why is she so drawn to these words? And why is she so downhearted by the subsequent U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Bush v. Gore*? What is the meaning to her of her personal file of legal cases marked “Good”?
6. Several of the characters in the 2000-01 story period feel that “it’s happening again.” Where do you see this sentiment expressed in the novel and what does it mean for a given character? Is it happening again? Or are the characters simply projecting the past onto the present? Is there a way to test whether it is or isn’t happening again, and do the characters do that?
7. There are certain recurring images in the novel including going round and round, walls, and diamonds. Where do you see these images and how do they relate to the story?
8. How do the Nazi laws (decrees, directives, orders, etc.) noted at the start of each chapter relate to the story as a whole? How do they help to tell the story of what happened to the Dutch Jewish community?

9. Grief and despair take many forms in this novel, from Sophia's reckless trips to Oosterpark, to Tessa's inability to see Sophia's face for years and years and replacing that image with a girl she met but briefly in Lisbon, to Ian's flirtations with risk on Barton Hill and on the lake and then finally his jumping into the lake. Collective grief and despair show, too, in the waves of suicides within the Jewish community in Amsterdam following certain historical events. Do you see other manifestations of grief and despair in the novel? Some characters protect themselves from grief and despair by developing coping mechanisms. Where do you see this in the novel?
10. On page 175, Stephanie and Ian cross paths briefly when out on the ice of Lake Topaqua in the early morning. Stephanie calls to Ian, "Ice is for dreamers." What does she mean by this, and in what ways are Ian and Stephanie similar to each other?
11. Why do you think Ian opens up about his life and emotional pain to Mrs. Pearl more easily than he does with his mother? Why can't Stephanie open up to her mother as easily as Ian does?
12. On page 182, when Willa Fletcher contemplates her frame of mind when she wrote and mailed in the ethics complaint against Arthur, she describes herself as having shrunk. In what ways have other characters in the 2000-01 story period "shrunk" or are living shrunken lives due to past wounding?
13. On page 270, Arthur Cantrell writes to Willa Fletcher: "That luck, which you talk about, is perhaps more available to us than we even know." He later states that he's questioning what he thinks about when he thinks about luck. "I think I've gotten all that quite wrong, made it all too simple." What do you think Arthur means by these words? Are these characters—all of whom are broken in some ways—lucky? In another passage between Jozef and Tessa, Tessa rejects the concept of luck as it relates to their survival. How do you see luck relating to Jozef and Tessa, and is it understandable why Tessa would reject such a concept, even though they beat the odds by surviving the Holocaust as it occurred in the Netherlands?
14. Several of the characters call themselves "survivors." What do they mean by that?
15. In what ways does the novel speak to current circumstances in the U.S., if at all?