

ALLEN & UNWIN



# READING GROUP NOTES

**Contents:** About the book (2) About the author (2)  
The author on writing the book (2) Reviews and quotes (3)  
Suggested points for discussion (3) Suggested further reading (4)

## About the book

Desperate to escape the Eastern front, Peter Faber, an ordinary German soldier, marries Katharina Spinell, a woman he has never met; it is a marriage of convenience that promises honeymoon leave for him and a pension for her should he die on the front. With ten days' leave secured, Peter visits his new wife in Berlin; both are surprised by the attraction that develops between them.

When Peter returns to the horrors of the front, it is only the dream of his wife that sustains him as he approaches Stalingrad. Back in Berlin, Katharina, goaded on by her desperate and delusional parents, ruthlessly works her way into the Nazi party hierarchy, wedding herself, her young husband and their unborn child to the regime. But when the tide of war turns and Berlin falls, Peter and Katharina, ordinary people stained with their small share of extraordinary guilt, find their simple dream of family increasingly hard to hold on to.

A stunning, riveting debut novel in the tradition of Bernhard Schlink's *The Reader* and Rachel Seiffert's *The Dark Room*, *The Undertaking* shines an intense light on history and illuminates the lives of those caught up in one of its darkest chapters.

## About the author

Audrey Magee worked for 12 years as a journalist, six of them as Ireland Correspondent of *The Times*, covering the conflict in Northern Ireland, the peace process and the havoc wreaked by the Omagh bomb. She has also written about Ireland for *The Guardian* and *The Observer*, and was Dublin stringer for Agence France Presse. Magee lived in Germany for a year between 1986 and 1987, when the men and women who had taken part in the war were living as grandparents, a shroud of silence over their past. She now lives in Wicklow with her husband and three daughters. *The Undertaking* is her first novel.

## Author, Audrey Magee, on writing *The Undertaking*

I was 18 in 1984 when I first went to Germany, when I first encountered the men and women who had survived the Second World War, who had lived through Nazism. The normality of their lives surprised me, as did the shroud of silence over one of the most traumatic events in world history. I was fascinated by this seeming normality, by this ability to resume everyday life in the wake of all that had happened.

Some three years later, while travelling in Munich, I met an American Jewish man who had lost relatives at Dachau, the concentration camp on the outskirts of the city. He had promised his family that he would visit the camp, but when we got there it was closed. He was very upset, as he was due to return to the US the following day, without fulfilling his promise. I suggested that we walk around the perimeter wall to at least get a sense of the place, of its size, its atmosphere. He agreed.

As we walked, we met an older woman tending to her garden that abutted the camp wall. We chatted, my serving as interpreter, the conversation flowing amicably until she told us that she had lived in that house all her life, had

slept and eaten in that house while the camp was operating. The American man was horrified. He demanded that she explain why she had done nothing to stop the pain and suffering, why she had done nothing to save the people in the camp. She shrugged her shoulders. She knew nothing; there was nothing she could have done. To him, these answers were unacceptable, inexcusable. He became increasingly upset; she increasingly adamant. The lines were drawn, with no chance of reconciliation between the young Jewish man and the older German woman. It was a difficult, fraught, exhausting encounter, and impossible to forget.

Some twelve years after that event, I was having dinner in a restaurant in a remote part of Ireland. The owner joined us at the end of the evening and began to talk. He was German, and had been a transport pilot on the Eastern front. He told us about his time at war, about how he had married a woman in Berlin he did know so that he could get honeymoon leave from the front. Everything came tumbling at me in that restaurant - my need to know more about what it was like to be an ordinary German during the Second World War, my need to understand why they had behaved the way they had, why they had done what they did. *The Undertaking* took root.

## Reviews & Quotes

'*The Undertaking* is written with sympathy and skill. The narrative is tense and engaging, filled with complex undertones, impelled by an urgency and a deep involvement with the characters.' - Colm Tóibín

'A bold and unsettling feat of empathy, all the more daring for its taut, beautifully understated style.' - A D Miller

'Audrey Magee is one of the most exciting new talents to arrive on the literary scene. There is an emotional depth to her writing which elevates her to the top rank of contemporary novelists. I read the book with awe and gratitude.'  
- Fergal Keane

'A violent, elegant, unsentimental journey through hell and halfway back. This is an outstanding novel by a writer of huge talent and unusual candour.' - Chris Cleave

## For discussion

- ☞ *The Undertaking* raises many difficult and complex issues, however the author describes her own writing as 'spare, almost simplistic'. How deliberate do you think this contrast is? What effect does it have?
- ☞ In *The Undertaking*, Magee puts very human faces to characters involved in the Nazi regime. How does this complicate our feelings towards the characters?
- ☞ How does Magee use the technique of contrast in switching back and forth between Peter and Katharina's stories? What do their corresponding stories highlight about the differences between life in Berlin and the experience of the soldiers at War?
- ☞ 'Cannon fodder. That's all. For Russian guns and German ambition' (p.86). In what ways do the soldiers' agree and disagree about their role in the war? How do their attitudes change as the war progresses?

- ☞ Discuss the impact of Johannes' death on the Spinell family. Do you think Mrs Spinell and Katharina are justified in blaming Mr Spinell for this tragic event? And does he accept responsibility?
- ☞ What is the role of memory for each of the characters in enduring the war? Particularly consider its significance for Faber, Faustmann and Kraft while at war.
- ☞ 'There is always a choice'. Consider the choices the characters are forced to make throughout the book. Do you agree with the above statement?
- ☞ *The Undertaking* is written about the Second World War from a German perspective, however the author is Irish. Discuss the complications of writing about the Holocaust as an outsider.
- ☞ Throughout the course of the book, the characters are in a constant state of speculation about the outcome of the Second World War. How did your knowledge of the outcome of history influence your reading of the book?
- ☞ At the end of the book the characters and the reader are left with the lingering question: 'Was it worth it?' What do you think?
- ☞ 'I thought it would be different. I imagined it differently.' (p.287). Consider the final reunion scene between Peter and Katharina. Did you imagine it was going to be different? Why do you think the characters are unable to stay together?
- ☞ What can fiction teach us about history? In what ways has Audrey Magee's fictional account added to or challenged your understanding of the Second World War?
- ☞ Did you finish the book convinced that something so awful could never happen again, or terrified that it could?

## Suggested further reading

*Hannah and Emil* – Belinda Castles

*The Storyteller* – Jodi Picoult

*The Reader* - Bernard Schlink

*Alone in Berlin* - Hans Fallada

*Good Living Street* – Tim Bodyhady

*The Dark Room* - Rachel Seiffert

*The Book Thief* – Markus Zusak

*All Quiet on the Western Front* - Erich Maria Remarque

*The Bread of those Early Years* - Heinrich Böll

*Second World War Poems* – ed. Hugh Haughton