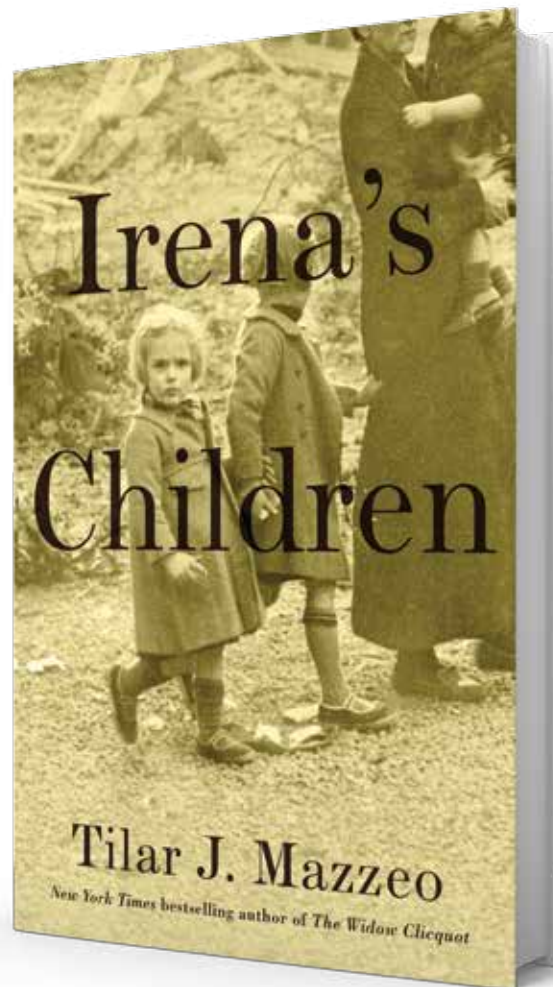


Irena's Children

Reading Group Guide



This readers group guide for *Irena's Children* includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Tilar J. Mazzeo. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion.

We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

INTRODUCTION

When German forces occupying Poland during World War II begin isolating and eradicating the Jewish population of Warsaw under Hitler's orders, Irena Sendler, a young social worker, courageously devotes herself to saving as many people as she can. Inspired by the life and work of her professor and mentor, Dr. Helena Radlińska, Sendler collaborates with fellow students, friends, her forbidden Jewish lover Adam, and countless others to deliver children of all ages from the hell of the Warsaw ghetto to hidden safe spots elsewhere in the city. The heroes in her network risk their lives daily—and many lose their lives—in order to save more than 2,500 children and countless adults who would otherwise be sent to their deaths at the hands of the Nazis. With a healthcare pass, Sendler travels in and out of the ghetto herself, making secret deliveries of food and medicine and smuggling out babies and children whose desperate parents beg her to take them. Although the discovery of any record-keeping would mean death for Sendler, she writes the names of the children she rescues on small slips of paper and guards the lists with her life in the hope that their true identities will not be lost and that reunification with their families will be possible some time in the future. As the death toll in Warsaw climbs and German soldiers begin looking for the resistance leader known as “Jolanta,” the risk of what Sendler stands to lose grows ever greater. Yet, confronted with what seem to be insurmountable obstacles, she continues on with unwavering and awe-inspiring determination and fortitude in a brave mission of hope that will affect entire generations to come.

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In the preface to the book, the author reveals that many of the people she wished to interview for her research told her: “I don't like to talk about those years with anyone who didn't live them” (page xii). Why did those people prefer not to discuss that time with anyone who didn't live then? Do you agree that this is advisable? Why or why not? The book then opens with a reference to a Yiddish folktale. What does the book ultimately seem to suggest about storytelling and the written word?
2. Also in the preface, the author speaks of her choice to show the complexity of Irena's character, stating that she thought it would be dishonoring Sendler to portray her as a saint (page xii). Why do you believe Mazzeo made this choice? How does Mazzeo's portrayal of heroism compare to, or differ from, traditional portrayals of heroism you have encountered, particularly within the genres of historical fiction and nonfiction?
3. Irena's father taught her that “people are either good or bad” (page 18). Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not? What did her father mean by this, and what did he think a person should not be judged by? What does the book ultimately seem to suggest about human nature and about how a person should be judged?
4. Why does Dr. Radlińska inspire so many of the people she meets? What causes is she committed to? What does she teach her students about “the commitment of a small group of well-intentioned people” (page 29)? Do you agree with her? Where do we find her concept in action elsewhere in the book?
5. In Chapter 8, the author says that Ala Gołęb-Grynberg “struggled between the instinct of a mother and that of a nurse and a social worker” (pages 126–27). What does she mean by this? Which of the roles ultimately took priority? Do you believe that this was the right choice? Explain. How are other people in the book forced to choose or prioritize among their different roles, and how do they reach their decisions?
6. Consider the treatment of religious faith in the book. How important is faith to the people characterized in the book? How important is it to Irena? Why are so many people angry that the children being rescued from the Warsaw ghetto are often baptized? Do you agree that the baptism was necessary? Why or why not?
7. Evaluate the theme of identity. How is identity defined in the book? Is identity portrayed as something that goes unchanged, or is it flexible? How do issues of identity create—or otherwise help to resolve—conflicts? What issues of identity arise in the book and how do the characters react to them?

8. Does the book ultimately suggest whether there is a fixed or universal code of ethics and morality and a fixed notion of what is “good” and what is “bad”? Explain. Consider also how complicity is treated in the book. Who is complicit, and why do these people choose to be complicit? Do their motives in some way justify their actions? Why or why not? Likewise, many of the people portrayed in the book betray one another. What is at the root of these betrayals? Discuss.
9. Evaluate the theme of hope. In what do the characters find hope? Is hope ultimately depicted as a positive and helpful force or a negative and frivolous force? Explain. For instance, why do so many people go to the Hotel Polski? What ultimately happens to them as a result of their decision? What does this indicate about the power of hope? What other examples of hope are found in the book?
10. Why are the lists that Irena keeps so important? What is their purpose? In addition to why they are important for the children she saves and their families, how do these lists come to influence Irena’s own fate?
11. The author tells us that, at the end of her mother’s life, Irena came to the realization that “she had been a terrible daughter” (page 233). Why does Irena think this? Do you agree that she was a bad daughter? Why or why not?
12. After the “liberation of Poland” (page 254), how did the people who lived during that time cope with their tragic history? How does Rachela Rosenthal cope, for instance, with the tragedies she faced?
13. The author tells us that Irena did not wish to be thought of as a heroine. Why does Irena say this? Why does she believe that her acts were not heroic? Do you believe that Irena’s actions were heroic, or do you agree with her that what she did was simply “normal” (page 263)? Does Mazzeo’s book ultimately suggest how we should define heroism? Explain.
14. Why do you think the author chose to append a coda? What information does she reveal in it? How does she say that the story of Irena presented in the book varies from a fairy tale or a movie version of the story? What happens to Irena after the Germans withdraw from Poland? How is Irena’s life influenced by the events that took place during that time period?
15. In the Afterword, the author states that she considers *Irena’s Children* a work of nonfiction. What were some of the obstacles the author faced in writing about this topic and presenting it as a work of nonfiction? What does this tell us about the way we talk about and write about history? Can we ever achieve an accurate portrayal of historical events? Explain.

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Irena Sendler has been called “the female Oskar Schindler.” View Steven Spielberg’s 1993 film *Schindler’s List*. What do Irena Sendler and Oskar Schindler have in common? Alternatively, what sets them apart? How does the visual portrayal of the events in the film compare to Mazzeo’s written account of this time?
2. Use *Irena’s Children* as a starting place to discuss the subjects of racism and persecution. What role does complicity play in the perpetuation of them? Within this context, discuss why Irena Sendler’s story is relevant today and what we can learn from her story.
3. Compare *Irena’s Children* to a fictional account of the events of World War II. How does Mazzeo’s book compare, for instance, to Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*? Does one genre—fiction or nonfiction—seem to be more effective than the other in treating this subject? Explain. Discuss how Mazzeo’s book challenges conventions of historical nonfiction.
4. Have you ever stood up for a cause at the risk of your own well-being? Discuss. What causes have you or would you be willing to stand up for as Irena did? What would you be willing to risk for your cause? Do you think you would have made the same decisions that Irena did? Explain why or why not. Discuss an event that affected your family for more than one generation.

A CONVERSATION WITH TILAR J. MAZZEO

What first inspired you to tell the story of Irena Sendler? Can you discuss the book's origins? Why were you particularly interested in telling the story from Irena's point of view?

In the first pages of the book, I talk a bit about how I came to write Irena's story and about how I first heard about this "lost" heroine in Poland. For me, Irena is at the center of a group of friends who do something amazingly courageous and decent, and I tell the story from her perspective because, in a sense, she's the ringleader. But, in a way, I also think of this as a book about the perspectives of a small group of friends—Irena, Ala, Rachela—and how their stories unfold in different directions.

Where and how did you begin to write the story of Irena Sendler, and how did you choose where to end the story?

I chose to begin the book with one of the most dramatic scenes in Irena's life: the moment that she is arrested by the Gestapo. I thought that it was important for the reader to understand, from the very beginning, the stakes. The actions that Irena and her friends took were truly a life-or-death gamble. But it was also important, after that, for the book to move chronologically through Irena's childhood, because the influence of her father was profound.

This biography of Irena stops at the end of the Second World War, and there were complex reasons for this. The primary reasons are that telling the story of the Communist period in Poland and gathering the archival materials that would be required is still extremely challenging. Poland is going through an informal period of "truth and reconciliation," and for many people this is still a period of living memory. These are stories that need more time to pass before they can be told with the kind of complexity the history demands. But there were also other reasons. After the war, Irena was in a particularly difficult situation, and it was a large part of the reason why her wartime story was silenced for such a long period. For her, what came after the war was another life entirely. So I think of this book as "the first life" of Irena Sendler.

In the Afterword, you clearly categorize this book as a work of nonfiction. Why did you choose to write and present the book in this way?

Irena Sendler is a historical public figure, and she and her friends did the things I write about in this book. The children she saved were real people, who went on to have real lives and families, in most cases. So nonfiction was an easy decision. But nonfiction doesn't mean that this is the one and only truth about these people or this moment in history. Nonfiction is a window on the past from one perspective. Historical storytelling always involves an element of subjectivity, and it always tells you something about the personality and interests of the storyteller as well as her subjects.

What kinds of sources did you consult in order to prepare for the writing of this book?

This was a very intensively researched book. I consulted with historical materials in archives around the world, especially in the United States, Canada, Germany, Poland, and Israel. I also had the opportunity to speak with a number of people who knew Irena or other people in the story such as Ala and Adam. Some of those people included a number of "Irena's children."

What information that you discovered was the most surprising to you?

I find the story of Ala incredibly moving and inspiring, and that was a story that I discovered only halfway through the writing of this book. There were moments when I wished that I were also writing the biography of Ala, and I did revise the book late in the process to tell more of her story alongside Irena's. The story of those two friends—who were both so brave and dedicated—and how their lives unfolded is very poignant to me and says something important, I think, about the truth of the Second World War.

What were the biggest obstacles you faced in writing this book, and how did you overcome them?

While the research for this book often involved quite a lot of problem solving and creativity to find the pieces of the story, the hardest part of writing this book was emotional. It is very difficult to sit down every day and read or write about this kind of mortal danger and the history of the Nazi period, especially because when you write a biography you become quite attached to your subject in intimate ways. I spent more time "with" Irena than with anyone else in my life during the time I was writing this book. You also become very emotionally involved during personal interviews in some cases, especially when you are talking

about Holocaust experiences and the life or death of people's families. The last summer I worked on this book was especially challenging: outside my study, I could hear the joyful screams of my young stepchildren and my young niece and nephew—the niece and nephew I write about in the first pages of the book—jumping in the pool and running around. Inside, I was reading about Treblinka and the fate of other small children. They were very complicated feelings, but I think having them made the book better and more compassionate.

How did the research and writing of this book change or influence your own view or interpretation of the events featured in the book?

Although this biography doesn't narrate the story of Irena's "second life" after the Second World War, the process of writing this book and deciding not to write about the Soviet period in Irena's life changed my understanding of the Cold War and Eastern Europe's position profoundly. As someone who grew up during the Cold War, I was surprised in researching this book how much I didn't know about that period and how abiding its legacy is.

***Irena's Children* seems like a departure from your previous works, but your books also share some overlapping themes. Can you discuss these? What do you think that your works have in common? What binds them as an oeuvre?**

I suppose this book is a departure in the sense that the subject is a somewhat darker one. My earliest books were on the history of champagne and businesswomen, and I do still have a strong interest in both wine and in the history of entrepreneurship. But in another sense, *Irena's Children* is very much part of my long-standing interest in biography. I've mostly written the biographies of strong, independent women, though without particularly setting out to do so. But I think what ties my books together most powerfully in my own experience of them is that I am interested in the stories of what people do when they are placed in difficult or even impossible situations. What do you do if you are a Jewish American woman living under a false passport in Paris and married to the director of the Hotel Ritz during the German occupation? Do you go home? Do you fight? Do you hide? Do you go mad? That is the story of Blanche Auzello in *The Hotel on Place Vendôme*. Or what do you do if you're a twentysomething young widow, with no business experience and born at a time when women aren't supported in working, and what you really want to do is build a company? What do you do when, given a chance to try, your first efforts are a failure? That's the story of *The Widow Clicquot*. And here, the questions Irena Sendler and her friends faced were another version of that dilemma.

How has *Irena's Children* influenced your current writing projects or changed the way you write?

Writing this book has reminded me how rich the experience of writing biography, as a particular subset of narrative nonfiction, can be, and I think I will probably do more in that genre as a result of *Irena's Children*. At the same time, I think I will probably take a break from writing about the Holocaust for a while. I've written two books in a row now on the Second World War, and I know more about the Gestapo than any person ought to.

As a reader, who are some of the storytellers you find most inspiring, and why?

I suppose I tend to enjoy reading the same kinds of narrative nonfiction that I want to write, and I've often learned a great deal from other writers. Joan Didion's essay "Goodbye to All That" is one of the most beautiful pieces of short memoir I know. Recently I also read John Vaillant's *The Golden Spruce*, a nonfiction story about a tree sacred to the native people of British Columbia and the ecological disaster of the West, and I thought it was brilliantly done. I am also a great fan of Leonard Cohen's novel *Beautiful Losers*, which I think captures something important about how history and storytelling are caught up with each other. I am interested in books that reimagine narrative nonfiction as a genre in which the storyteller is also a silent character.

Are there any significant events from your own childhood or adolescence that you feel ultimately shaped the course of your life and your identity? And how has your own interpretation of this event changed over the years?

Well, this is a very complicated question, and some day, perhaps, I will write a memoir about the answer to it. For the moment, what I can say is that you don't end up with a name like mine unless there is a good story behind it. My experience of my personal history is that storytelling is at the heart of all our identities.