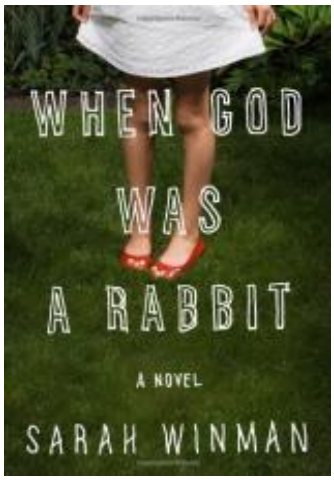
When God Was a Rabbit

by Sarah Winman



About the Book

Elly is the kind of girl who grows up too fast. She doesn?t like to play with little girls her age; she prefers the company of Mr. Golan, her elderly neighbor. But her friendship with Mr. Golan takes a dark turn, and only Elly?s brother, Joe, knows her secret. Joe gives Elly a pet rabbit, which she names god, to alleviate the loneliness of her childhood. Elly soon finds another best friend: Jenny Penny, a new girl in town who has a chaotic home life. But Elly and Jenny are soon separated, too --- Elly?s parents decide to open a bed-and-breakfast in Cornwall, and Jenny disappears without a trace. Friendless in her new town, Elly leans on her family for support, especially Joe, who is struggling to come to terms with his sexuality.

Even as an adult, shadows from childhood haunt Elly?s life. She learns that Jenny Penny murdered an abusive husband, and they renew their friendship through letters Jenny writes from jail. Elly finds her calling as a newspaper columnist, writing about the relationships she has lost and found. Joe tries to start a new life in New York, but he disappears in the chaos of 9/11. Elly manages to track Joe down, but he has lost his memory and feels stifled by his sister?s devotion. As Joe?s memory gradually returns, he reveals Elly?s childhood secret: Mr. Golan molested her. Elly?s loved ones can finally help her heal, and she learns to rely on the family and friends who have stood by her during her years of silence.

Discussion Guide

1. In the prologue of **When God Was a Rabbit**, Elly recalls a coin trick Jenny Penny showed her when they were children. What does Elly learn about faith, loyalty, and magic from Jenny? How does this scene introduce their friendship, and how does it foreshadow the problems that the girls will face?

2. Discuss Elly?s friendship with Abraham Golan, her next-door neighbor. Why does Elly prefer his company to friends her own age? Why doesn?t Elly tell her parents her secret about Mr. Golan? How does she react to his death, and how does the secret haunt her in the years to come?

3. Why does Elly name her pet rabbit god? How does this name relate to her father?s ambivalence about religion and fate? As an adult, Elly writes in her ?Lost and Found? column that her childhood was a time ?when sweets were a penny and god was a rabbit? (246). How has Elly?s view of the world changed since that magical time?

4. According to Elly, ?Jenny Penny?s mother was as different from mine as any mother could be? (46). What are the differences between these two mothers? What are some similarities that might not be so apparent to young Elly?

5. Discuss the consequences of Mr. X?s case, when Elly?s father defended a guilty man against charges of child molestation. Why does the death of Mr. X?s accuser continue to haunt Elly?s father? Does he ever forgive himself for Mr. X?s acquittal? Why or why not?

6. Part Two of the novel picks up fifteen years later, in 1995. How has Elly changed? In what ways has Elly failed to come to terms with her past? How will she mend her two closest relationships --- with her brother and with Jenny --- in Part Two?

7. Although **When God Was a Rabbit** features traumatic events --- child molestation, suicide, kidnapping, murder, illness, and terrorism --- the novel also shines with humor. How does the novel manage to balance tragedy and comedy?

8. Consider the character of Nancy, Elly and Joe?s glamorous aunt. How does Nancy support her family in difficult times? How does she help Joe come to terms with his homosexuality?

9. After her move to Cornwall, Elly sends Jenny a fossil she found with Nancy, who says, ?Nothing stays forgotten for long, Elly. Sometimes we have to remind the world that we?re special and that we?re still here? (105). Why does Jenny return the fossil to Elly when she gets out of jail? What does the fossil symbolize to Jenny and Elly?

10. Discuss the high and low points of Elly?s parents? relationship. How does a Mercedes almost break up their marriage? Why does Elly?s father feel alienated from his wife when she insists that Joe is still alive after 9/11? What role does Nancy play within their marriage, and how does this complicated love triangle seem to work?

11. When Joe suffers from amnesia after 9/11, Elly remembers a phrase from her childhood, when god the rabbit reappeared after his death: ?I am here but I am not yours? (267). How does this saying apply to Joe and to the rabbit? What does Elly learn about lasting relationships from each of these losses?

12. Compare Elly and Jenny?s friendship to Joe and Charlie?s. How do Elly and Joe lose touch with their best friends? How does each sibling cope with the loss? How does each friendship survive long distances and tragic events?

13. Realizing how much she has kept from her parents, Elly thinks, ?I knew I?d hurt them with this distance, with this silence, and now they?d understand; but at what price?? (288). What was the price of keeping the secret, and what are the costs and benefits of telling it?

14. When God Was the Rabbit incorporates world events into the plot, from John Lennon?s murder to international kidnappings to the tragic losses of 9/11. How does history look through Elly?s eyes? What perspective does she have on tragedy and loss?

15. Consider the ties among family members, friends, and lovers in When God Was a Rabbit. Which bond seems strongest for these characters: family, friendship, or romance? Give some examples to explain your answer.

Author Bio

Sarah Winman is the author of WHEN GOD WAS A RABBIT, A YEAR OF MARVELOUS WAYS, TIN MAN and STILL LIFE. She grew up in Essex and now lives in London. She attended the Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art and went on to act in theatre, film and television.

Critical Praise

"No bare-bones plot summary can do justice to this wonderfully wise and compellingly readable tale of love and friendship in all their forms, of family uncircumscribed by biological bonds, and of loss worse than death. A remarkable first novel, worth savoring."

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