Fall of Giants: Book One of the Century Trilogy

by Ken Follett

About the Book

Ken Follett’s magnificent new historical epic begins, as five interrelated families move through the momentous dramas of the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and the struggle for women’s suffrage.

A thirteen-year-old Welsh boy enters a man’s world in the mining pits… An American law student rejected in love finds a surprising new career in Woodrow Wilson’s White House…. A housekeeper for the aristocratic Fitzherberts takes a fateful step above her station, while Lady Maud Fitzherbert herself crosses deep into forbidden territory when she falls in love with a German spy…. And two orphaned Russian brothers embark on radically different paths when their plan to emigrate to America falls afoul of war, conscription, and revolution.

From the dirt and danger of a coal mine to the glittering chandeliers of a palace, from the corridors of power to the bedrooms of the mighty, Fall of Giants takes us into the inextricably entangled fates of five families—and into a century that we thought we knew, but that now will never seem the same again….

Discussion Guide

1. Before reading Fall of Giants, what did you know about World War I? Did you learn anything new upon finishing the novel?

2. Is there a custom or practice from the book’s early 20th-century time period that you wish existed in our modern day? What would it be, and why do you think it should have a place in today’s world?

3. Is it significant that Fall of Giants begins with the stories of Billy and Ethel Williams? Would the novel have been different if other characters’ stories opened the book, such as those of Grigori and Lev Peshkov, or Gus Dewar?
4. Talk about the historical figures that appear throughout *Fall of Giants*, such as Woodrow Wilson, King George V, Vladimir Lenin, and others. What did you think of Ken Follett’s depiction of them? Do you like seeing notable people such as these come alive in fiction, or do you prefer reading about them in a strictly historical context?

5. When you first read about Billy Williams in chapter one, did you anticipate how his life would unfurl --- for example, that he would end up in running for Parliament? What about other characters: Could you guess what some of them would end up doing or being at the book’s end?

6. Do you enjoy reading epic novels such as this one? What makes them so appealing to readers, in your opinion?

7. In continuation of the above question, if you had to identify one of the main characters’ stories as one that would make a good “stand-alone” novel, which would it be? Why do you think his/her story would make an enjoyable book on its own?

8. Think about the main characters and what place faith held in their lives. Did religion help or hinder their respective circumstances? What is the overall role of religion in *Fall of Giants*?

9. Along these lines, discuss the characters who abandoned their respective faiths. What caused them to walk away from their beliefs? To what end?

10. Follett depicts life in the early twentieth century through a series of detailed and imagery-rich scenes: the pitch-darkness of a Welsh coal mine, the opulence of an English country manor, the austerity of pre-industrial Russia, the horrors of a French battlefield. Which scenes stood out for you? Why did they make such an impression?

11. Follett writes from the vantage points of people whose home countries come to the brink of --- and finally enter into --- a world war. What was it like to read the perspectives of enemies as they embark on battle with one another? Did you find yourself taking sides in any way? Did reading about World War I through fiction cause you to think differently about the conflict?

12. Follett populates this novel with several strong female characters. Compare/contrast some of them; who was your favorite? Which one did you like least? Apply the same question to the book’s male figures. When considering those of different backgrounds and social classes, were any of the male figures similar to one another?

13. Discuss Maud and Ethel’s relationship. Did you expect them to form such a lasting bond, considering they met as mistress and servant? What did you think of the circumstances surrounding how their friendship ultimately dissolved?

14. Also contemplate Ethel and Maud’s work as women’s rights advocates. Were there aspects of each woman’s personal life that seemed at odds with her commitment to advancing the cause of women?

15. Go back to the Aberowen mine explosion in chapter two. Do you think it’s a metaphor for any of the novel’s themes? How do things change in Aberowen, and elsewhere, after this disaster?

16. Discuss examples of the disparity between how women and men were treated during this era. Were women regarded better, or worse, than you imagined they’d be? How far have women come since the early 1900s? What inequalities between the sexes still persist today?

17. Think about the ways the main characters’ lives intersected throughout the book. Were there any characters that didn’t meet over the entirety of the novel that you wished did? Who, and why?
What did you think of Earl Fitzherbert at the beginning of Fall of Giants? How did he evolve as a man throughout the course of the narrative? Did your opinion of Fitz change from your initial impression of him?

Consider the book’s title. Who or what are the “giants” of the story? How did they fall?

What did you think of the book’s ending? Did the author succeed in wrapping up the many threads and strands in Fall of Giants? Which of the characters in Fall of Giants do you expect to be reading about in books two and three of The Century Trilogy?

Author Bio

Ken Follett is one of the world’s most successful authors. Over 160 million copies of the 30 books he has written have been sold in over 80 countries and in 33 languages.

Born on June 5, 1949, in Cardiff, Wales, the son of a tax inspector, Ken was educated at state schools and went on to graduate from University College, London, with an Honours degree in philosophy. He was made a fellow of the college in 1995.

He started his career as a reporter, first with his hometown newspaper, the South Wales Echo, and then with the London Evening News. Subsequently, he worked for a small London publishing house, Everest Books, eventually becoming the deputy managing director.

Ken’s last project, the Century Trilogy, has sold 19.5 million copies worldwide. The three books tell the story of the twentieth century through five generations on three continents.

Ken’s first major success came with the publication of EYE OF THE NEEDLE in 1978. A World War II thriller set in England, this book earned him the 1979 Edgar Award for Best Novel from the Mystery Writers of America. It remains one of his most popular books.

In 1989, Ken’s epic novel about the building of a medieval cathedral, THE PILLARS OF THE EARTH, was published. It reached number one on bestseller lists everywhere and was turned into a major television series produced by Ridley Scott, which aired in 2010. WORLD WITHOUT END, the sequel to THE PILLARS OF THE EARTH, proved equally popular when it was published in 2007.

Ken’s next book, titled A COLUMN OF FIRE, is a historical novel about spies and secret agents in the sixteenth century, the time of Queen Elizabeth I. Set partly in the fictional town of Kingsbridge, it is a sequel to bestsellers THE PILLARS OF THE EARTH and WORLD WITHOUT END and will be published by Viking in Fall 2017.

Ken has been active in numerous literacy charities and was the president of Dyslexia Action for ten years. He was the chair of the National Year of Reading, a joint initiative between government and businesses. He is also active in many Stevenage charities and is the president of the Stevenage Community Trust.

Ken, who loves music almost as much as he loves books, is an enthusiastic bass guitar player in two bands. He lives in Stevenage, Hertfordshire, England, with his wife, Barbara, the former Labour member of Parliament for Stevenage. Between them they have five children, six grandchildren, and three Labradors.

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Critical Praise
"Sure to be one of the season’s inevitable and unavoidable blockbusters --- and not undeservedly."

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