ReadingGroupGuides
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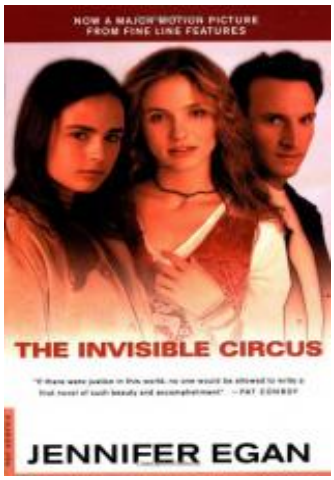
Invisible Circus

by Jennifer Egan



About the Book

The high ideals and inevitable compromises of the 1960's form the background to this acclaimed first novel. Phoebe O'Connor, eighteen years old in the summer of 1978, is too young to know the 1960s, but old enough to feel its influences. Living in San Francisco with her widowed mother, Phoebe is obsessed with the memory of her charismatic older sister, Faith, a flower child who died in 1970. Searching for the truth about her death and life, Phoebe follows Faith's trail from San Francisco through Europe, culminating in the very place where she leapt to her death. The truth that Phoebe discovers is larger and darker than one death; it goes to the ambiguous heart of a generation that tried to follow its dreams of freedom, only to defer those dreams.

Discussion Guide

1. Do the 60s have enduring symbolism for America? How do we understand and misunderstand this era in our history?

2. Are you able to characterize your generation? What traits would you ascribe to it?

3. Describe the moment in which Phoebe first understands her sister's suicide. What finally allows her to see the truth?

4. Talk about the most important rite of passage you experienced. Compare the feelings and beliefs you held before with those you held after.

5. When Phoebe meets Wolf -- the man who accompanied Faith in Europe -- how does her journey change? What does Wolf show Phoebe about herself?

6. **The Invisible Circus** traces a younger sister's search for her older sister. In what ways might the novel differ if the author had chosen to make the characters brothers?

7. Does the title of the book deepen your understanding of the plot? How does the circus in chapter one reflect Phoebe's experience?

8. What role do images -- paintings, photographs, postcards, and so on play in the novel? Is there a religious dimension to some of them?

Author Bio

Jennifer Egan is the author of several novels and a short story collection. Her 2017 novel, MANHATTAN BEACH, a *New York Times* bestseller, was awarded the Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction, and was chosen as New York City?s One Book One New York read. Her previous novel, A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD, won the 2011 Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the *Los Angeles Times* book prize, and was named one of the best books of the decade by *Time Magazine* and *Entertainment Weekly*. Also a journalist, she has written frequently in the *New York Times Magazine*, and she recently completed a term as President of PEN America. Her most recent novel, THE CANDY HOUSE, a sibling to A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD, was named one of the *New York Times* ?s 10 Best Books of 2022, as well as one of President Obama?s favorite reads of 2022.

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Critical Praise

"Wonderful . . . words glide through her fingers and enter the pores like cool San Francisco fog. "

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