ReadingGroupGuides
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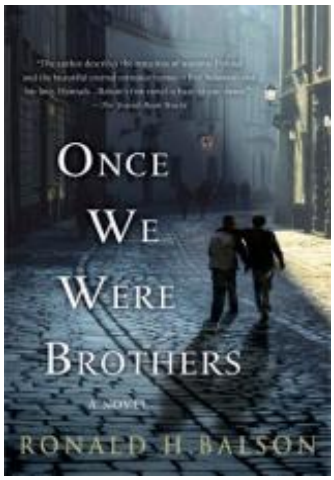
# Once We Were Brothers

by Ronald H. Balson




## About the Book

*The gripping tale about two boys, once as close as brothers, who find themselves on opposite sides of the Holocaust.*

Elliot Rosenzweig, a respected civic leader and wealthy philanthropist, is attending a fundraiser when he is suddenly accosted and accused of being a former Nazi SS officer named Otto Piatek, the Butcher of Zamosc. Although the charges are denounced as preposterous, his accuser is convinced he is right and engages attorney Catherine Lockhart to bring Rosenzweig to justice. Solomon persuades Lockhart to take his case, revealing that the true Piatek was abandoned as a child and raised by Solomon's own family only to betray them during the Nazi occupation. But has Solomon accused the right man?

ONCE WE WERE BROTHERS is Ronald H. Balson's compelling tale of two boys and a family who struggle to survive in war-torn Poland, and a young love that struggles to endure the unspeakable cruelty of the Holocaust. Two lives, two worlds, and 60 years converge in an explosive race to redemption that makes for a moving and powerful tale of love, survival, and ultimately the triumph of the human spirit.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** Does it trouble you to think that remnants of the Nazi era may remain? Of the six hundred thousand SS members remaining at the end of the war, only a few thousand were actually brought to justice. Most escaped. Some to America. Only one hundred or so have been found and deported. Was Ben?s quest after all these years, in spite of Rosenzweig?s civic contributions, justified?

**2.** Responding to someone who said, ?I can't believe anybody cares about those events of so long ago,? Eli Rosenbaum, former head of the U.S. Office of Special Investigations, stated, ?I think there?s particular value in showing would-be perpetrators that if one dares to perpetrate such crimes, there is a chance that he or she will be pursued for the rest of his or her life to locations thousands of miles from the locations of their crimes.? Where do you stand? Do you think we should continue seek out and prosecute now-elderly Nazi war criminals?

**3.** It is said that ?first impressions are lasting ones.? What were your first impressions of the principal characters? At what point did your opinion change? Why?

**4.** Ben?s family had the opportunity to leave Europe at certain times in the story. When cousin Ziggy told them of the persecution in Germany and when Uncle Joseph came from Vienna, they could have all escaped through the mountains into Slovakia. Why didn?t they take advantage of each of those opportunities? Why did Jewish families remain?

**5.** From the diaries of survivors, there are many stories of extraordinary heroism, of ordinary people who, in the darkest moments, find unbelievable strength and courage. Have you known such people? Where do you think they find such courage?

**6.** If you had the opportunity to speak to any of the characters at any moment in the story, to whom would you choose to talk, what advice would you give, and what would you say?

**7.** Ben was a religious man, as was Catherine. If religious doctrine preaches that God is all-knowing and omnipotent, how does a religious person accept the existence of the Holocaust in God?s world?

**8.** Ethnic slaughter, the oppression of minorities, did not cease with the end of World War II. Does the world community today do enough to respond to the oppressors? What should be done?

**9.** Why did Elisabeth decide to turn against her husband? Did it have anything to do with her fear of facing Ben?

## Author Bio

Ronald H. Balson is an attorney, professor and writer. His novel THE GIRL FROM BERLIN won the National Jewish Book Award and was the Illinois Reading Council's adult fiction selection for their *Illinois Reads* program. He is also the author of THE RIGHTEOUS, A PLACE TO HIDE, AN AFFAIR OF SPIES, DEFENDING BRITTA STEIN, ELI'S PROMISE, KAROLINA'S TWINS, THE TRUST, SAVING SOPHIE and the international bestseller ONCE WE WERE BROTHERS. He has appeared on many television and radio programs and has lectured nationally and internationally on his writing. He lives in Chicago.

## Critical Praise

"The phenomenal triumph of lawyer-author John Grisham?s legal thrillers has spawned surprisingly few successful emulators; however, Chicago attorney Balson?s first novel, while featuring a young lawyer heroine, Catherine Lockhart, who sees her bar admission as a license to further justice, is no simple imitation of Grisham?s entertaining potboilers..., this novel is uplifting and moving, intelligently written and featuring historically accurate context and an unusual insight into human character and motivations. Highly recommended for all readers."

? Starred *Library Journal* Review

"Balson does a number of things superbly: he crafts a highly readable plotline and makes great use of the Chicago backdrop?many will enjoy this gripping novel for its narrative drive and its emotional storytelling."

? *Booklist* Review

"The author describes the atrocities of wartime Poland and the beautiful, eternal romance between Ben Solomong and his life, Hannah. Balson's first novel is hard to put down."

? *The Jewish Book World*

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**Publication Date:** October 8, 2013
**Genres:** Fiction, Historical Fiction
**Hardcover:** 400 pages
**Publisher:** St. Martin's Griffin
**ISBN-10:** 1250048125
**ISBN-13:** 9781250048127