Strangers in Budapest

by Jessica Keener



About the Book

Budapest: gorgeous city of secrets, with ties to a shadowy, bloody past. It is to this enigmatic European capital that a young American couple, Annie and Will, move from Boston with their infant son shortly after the fall of the Communist regime. For Annie, it is an effort to escape the ghosts that haunt her past and Will wants simply to seize the chance to build a new future for his family.

Eight months after their move, their efforts to assimilate are thrown into turmoil when they receive a message from friends in the US asking that they check up on an elderly man, a fiercely independent Jewish American WWII veteran who helped free Hungarian Jews from a Nazi prison camp. They soon learn that the man, Edward Weiss, has come to Hungary to exact revenge on someone he is convinced seduced, married and then murdered his daughter.

Annie, unable to resist anyone?s call for help, recklessly joins in the old man?s plan to track down his former son-in-law and confront him, while Will, pragmatic and cautious by nature, insists they have nothing to do with Weiss and his vendetta. What Annie does not anticipate is that in helping Edward she will become enmeshed in a dark and deadly conflict that will end in tragedy and a stunning loss of innocence.

Atmospheric and surprising, STRANGERS IN BUDAPEST is, as bestselling novelist Caroline Leavitt says, a ?dazzlingly original tale about home, loss and the persistence of love.?

Discussion Guide

1. In STRANGERS IN BUDAPEST, the city of Budapest seems to function like another character in the story. What are some of the characteristics of this Eastern European city that helped to shape Annie?s experience there? Do you think the story would have unfolded differently if it were set in Philadelphia? What does the idea of a place functioning as a character mean to you?

2. When Annie meets Edward, something about the old man takes hold of her and her relationship with him quickly grows intense --- with Edward provoking Annie to let down her guard. Annie?s husband, Will, tells her not to get involved. Why do you think Annie ignores Will?s warnings to stay out of Edward's problems?

3. The Holocaust and the plight of the Jews in Europe during WWII is woven into the novel. Annie is not Jewish, but her husband is, and so is Edward, who fought in WWII and helped to liberate Dachau. In what ways do you think Judaism influences the story?

4. What are your thoughts about Annie's attraction (or is it the opposite?) to Will's former boss, Bernardo? Do you think she wishes Will would share Bernardo's boldness in approaching life?

5. From the outside, Annie appears ?normal,? yet something about her feels off center, as though she is yearning to break free. Why do you think Annie disdains offers to help her integrate into the American ex-pat community? Do you see a pattern in her behavior, in the idea of actively staying away from people and places that are like herself?

6. In the novel, the gypsies are almost like phantoms floating around the fringes of the city, appearing in the middle of things but never really being a part of anything. Why do you think Annie becomes obsessed with them? Do you think they represent some part of Annie? If so, what?

7. How did you feel about Annie?s relationship with Stephen? Do you think she was attracted to him or repulsed by him? Or was it both?

8. Can you see yourself moving to another country as Annie and Will do with their young son? Annie seemed to be trying to escape from something, while Will was looking to embrace something new. Of the two, which do you think had the stronger motivation, and, in the end, the stronger will?

9. There seemed to be a kind of inevitability to the way Edward?s and Stephen?s stories played out, but without Annie?s role in their lives it?s likely that none of it would have happened. Do you feel that Annie made the right decisions? If so, why? If not, why not?

10. What do you think Annie and Will?s relationship will be once they are away from Budapest and back home in America? Do you think the marriage will survive? Why, or why not?

Author Bio

Jessica Keener is the author of the national bestselling novel NIGHT SWIM and a collection of award-winning short stories, WOMEN IN BED. Her work has appeared in *O, The Oprah Magazine*, *Redbook*, *the Boston Globe*, *Agni* and other publications, and she has taught English literature and writing at Brown University, Boston University, the

University of Miami and GrubStreet. She lives in the Boston area.

Critical Praise

?Jessica Keener has written a gorgeous, lyrical, and sweeping novel about the tangled web of past and present. Suspenseful, perceptive, fast-paced, and ultimately restorative.?

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