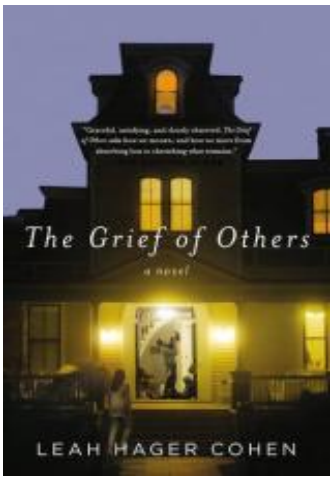
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The Grief of Others

by Leah Hager Cohen



About the Book

In the tradition of **The Memory Keeper?s Daughter**, a gripping, generous, and provocative novel chronicling the grief that follows the death of a newborn --- and leads to a family?s emotional reawakening.

It begins with loss. John and Ricky Ryrie are stricken by the death of their third child, only fifty-seven hours after his birth. Struggling to regain a semblance of normalcy, they find themselves pretending not only that little has changed, but that nothing was wrong before this baby came so briefly into their lives. Yet in the aftermath of his death, long suppressed uncertainties about their relationship come roiling to the surface. A dreadful secret emerges concerning what Ricky knew about her pregnancy and concealed from everyone, even John. And the couple?s two older children, grappling with the tensions around them, begin to act out in exquisitely, perhaps courageously, idiosyncratic ways. Ultimately, though, the grief that was initially so isolating brings the four family members to connect powerfully with the sadness and burdens of others --- to the grief that is part of every human life and that carries within it the ability to draw us together. And in the end, Ricky and John?s marriage is stronger for the transformation their grief has allowed.

Moving, psychologically acute, and gorgeously written, **The Grief of Others** is Leah Hager Cohen at the height of her talent in what is sure to be her breakout book, one that forces readers to ask themselves: What would I have done? The Grief of Others exposes the paradox that facing tragedy together can in fact awaken us to our better selves and take us from fear to a place of hope and optimism.

Discussion Guide

1. The book?s prologue opens with the physical description of a beautiful newborn baby and his mother?s intimate emotional connection to him, despite what she knows of his fate. What does the author achieve with this opening? Did it make you more invested in the plight of the mother, or the loss of the baby? Did it affect your feelings about the mother later in the book, when you gained a fuller understanding of what led up to this point?

2. Eventually, it is revealed that Ricky kept something deeply important from her husband. What do you think of her decision? Is it understandable? What are her motivations? How do you think you would have acted in that situation?

3. When her husband learns the truth about what Ricky has kept from him, he equates it with infidelity. She says, ?Please. I kept a secret. I thought it was the right thing. It wasn?t right, but I thought it was. It was hard on me. I didn?t cheat on you. It?s not like an affair.? And he responds, ?It?s exactly like an affair?. It?s worse than when you had the affair.? What do you think? How does Ricky?s deceit compare to having an affair? Are they comparable?

4. In addition to the nuclear Ryrie family, the book also focuses on Jessica, John?s daughter from a previous relationship, and Gordie, a neighbor dealing with the loss of his father. Why do you think these two characters were included? What perspectives do they add for the reader? How do interactions with them affect the Ryries?

5. The story is also told from the perspectives of the children, Biscuit and Paul. What does this offer to the book as a whole? How do Biscuit and Paul?s experiences of this time period differ from those of their parents? How do the children?s responses differ from one another? How much of this has to do with their respective ages, do you think, and how much is about their personalities? Do you think the children would have suffered less if the parents had behaved differently?

6. John and Ricky try very hard to be good parents. Why don?t they notice how much their children are suffering? What opens their eyes finally? How do they try to correct their behavior?

7. Think about times when you yourself have grieved. Which Ryrie did you behave the most like? How did you move past that time of loss?

8. Part of why the Ryrie family is suffering so deeply is because the loss of baby Simon was so soon after his birth. The author herself says that her inspiration for this book came from her own miscarriage. Think about types of losses that people are encouraged to keep to themselves or ?get over.? How does that grief get expressed? Would it be healthier if there were more public acknowledgment of that grief? How can we make a place for that in our lives?

9. In addition to the main narrative, there are substantial flashbacks in the novel, including the one to the lake vacation. Why do you think the author chose to tell these parts of the story? What perspective do they add? How do they change how you feel at the end?

10. The Grief of Others opens with the death of baby Simon, but many of the problems facing the Ryrie family existed before his birth. What were they? How were those more every-day issues affected by the sudden traumatic events? Do you think John and Ricky?s marriage would be in a similar place, ultimately, if they had not experienced the loss of the baby and all that followed? Why or why not?

11. Think about grief itself. We often try to stigmatize it as a dark emotion that should not be indulged. How is grief

good for a person? For a family? What is the benefit of sharing? Think about your own life, what is a positive example of grief helping you become stronger on the other side?

Author Bio

Leah Hager Cohen is the author of four nonfiction books, including TRAIN GO SORRY and GLASS, PAPER, BEANS, and three novels, most recently HOUSE LIGHTS. Among the honors her books have received are New York Times Notable Book (four times); American Library Association Ten Best Books of the Year; Toronto Globe and Mail Ten Best Books of the Year; and Booksense 76 Pick.

She holds the Jenks Chair in Contemporary American Letters at the College of the Holy Cross, and teaches in the MFA Program in Creative Writing at Lesley University. She is a frequent contributor to the *New York Times Book Review*.

Critical Praise

"Like the beautifully depicted miniatures that appear in these pages, Leah Hager Cohen offers an extraordinary rendering of an ordinary family in crisis. **The Grief of Others** is delicate, haunting, and lovely, and very difficult to leave on the shelf."

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