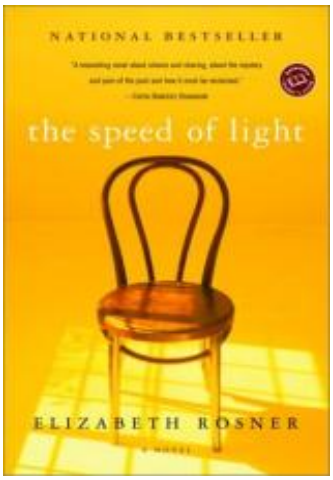
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The Speed of Light

by Elizabeth Rosner



About the Book

Every family has a story. Every story, eventually, must be told.

For most of their lives, Julian Perel and his sister, Paula, lived in a house cast in silence, witnesses to a father struggling with a devastating secret too painful to share. Though their father took his demons to the grave, his past refuses to rest.

As adults, brother and sister struggle to find their voices. A scientist governed by numbers and logic, Julian now lives an ordered life of routine and seclusion. *My father gave up his language and his homeland. But he carried his sadness with him, under his skin. It was mine now.* In contrast, Paula has entered the world as eagerly as Julian retracts from it. An aspiring opera singer, she is always moving, buoyant with sound. *Singing was the only gift I could offer to my father. I filled the house with music. I tried to give him joy. . . .*

Yet both their lives begin to change on a *Wednesday, miercoles, the day that sounds like miracles.* Before embarking on a European opera tour, Paula asks her housekeeper, Sola, to stay at her place--and to look after Julian in the apartment above. Yet Sola, too, has a story. *I want to clean myself like the window of a house, make myself clear for things to pass through. Flat and quiet.*

As Paula uncovers pieces of her father's early life in Budapest and the horrifying truth of his past, Julian bears witness to Sola's story--revelations that help all three learn how to both surrender and revere the shadows that have followed them for so long.

The Speed of Light is a powerful debut about three unforgettable souls who overcome the tragedies of the past to reconnect with one another and the world around them. In an extraordinary accomplishment, Elizabeth Rosner has created a novel of love and redemption that proves the pain of the untold story is far greater than even the most difficult truth.

Discussion Guide

1. The Speed of Light features three very distinctive characters and their struggles to overcome the difficulties of their past. Which character did you relate to the most, and why?

2. The novel ends with each character on the brink of a new discovery. What do you imagine happens after the end of the book? What do you think the future holds for Sola, Julian, and Paula?

3. Compare and contrast how the presence of color, scent, and sound informs the lives of Julian, Paula, and Sola.

4. In the novel, bearing witness to tragedy implies a responsibility held by both the person telling the story and the person listening. How do you think these responsibilities differ? Do you agree with Sola that each role is important in the healing process? Do you think this idea is applicable to the world today?

5. Did any of the characters or scenes from **The Speed of Light** stay with you after you finished reading the book? If so, which ones and why?

6. The bonds of family are a central theme in the novel-both the secrets and silences that arise, as well as the close relationships formed between parent and child, brother and sister. Are there any feelings in the book that resonate with your own family experiences? Do you think this kind of complexity is common to the American family today?

Author Bio

Elizabeth Rosner is a bestselling novelist, poet and essayist. Her works include SURVIVOR CAFÉ: The Legacy of Trauma and the Labyrinth of Memory, a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award, and the novel ELECTRIC CITY, named a best book by NPR. Rosner's essays have appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Elle* and numerous anthologies. She lives in Berkeley, California.

Critical Praise

"**The Speed of Light** is an elegant, meticulous, and quite subtle novel about lives lived at a remove from, but forever connected to, tragedy--the camps. Ms. Rosner's imaginative aim, of course, is to show us great human importance where we might've thought it didn't reside, and to change us with this knowledge. She certainly succeeds."Richard Ford"A resonating novel about silence and sharing, about the mystery and pain of the past and how it must be reclaimed. Beautifully written, in images that sing in our ears long after we've put the book down."Chitra Ranertee Divakaruni,

author of **The Mistress of Spices** and **The Unknown Errors of Our Lives**"Rilke memorably defined art as exactness, a hatred of the vague, and by that definition **The Speed of Light** is poetry sustained. The precision of the language here, the structural arrangements and the deft evocation of character in history all herald a genuine talent--not so much emerging as achieved. Ms. Rosner's debut novel turns sorrow into song."Nicholas Delbanco, author of **What Remains** "With its symphony of voices, The Speed of Light tells a haunting story of loss and redemption. It is beautifully written and utterly affecting."Tova Mirvis, author of **The Ladies Auxiliary**"Elizabeth Rosner touches a chord deep down where our fears are buried, then makes that chord vibrate and hum until magic happens and it sings. I loved this book. It entered my dreams."Beverly Donofrio, author of **Riding in Cars with Boys** and **Looking For Mary**"Elizabeth Rosner has written a lyrical and absorbing novel whose power is enriched by its understatement. This uncommon story not only probes how children wrestle with the silence handed down to them by a silent father cursed with inexhaustible sorrow, but it also tells us of the healing magic of love and does so through a marvelous and unusual character--a Latino housekeeper--who will find an enduring spot in readers' hearts."Joseph Berger, author of **Displaced Persons: Growing Up American After the Holocaust**

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