ReadingGroupGuides
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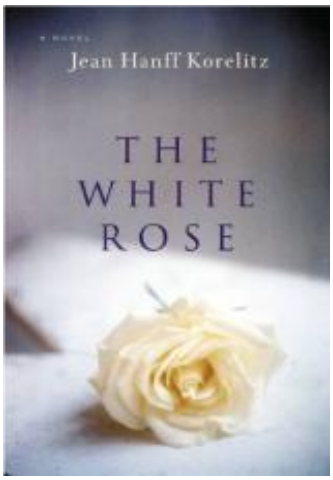
The White Rose

by Jean Hanff Korelitz



About the Book

"We're taking a position that celebrates the transience of the flower. Not that we don't prolong the bloom as long as we can, but we recognize that a flower's impermanence is part of its beauty."

A sweeping tale of love and deception, wealth and beauty, obligation and desire, **The White Rose** is as seductive a story as the flower for which it's named.

Marian Kahn, a forty-eight-year-old professor of history at Columbia University, is in the midst of an affair with a man twenty-two years her junior. Although Oliver's wish for commitment is genuine, Marian knows the day will come when they must part ways. She will never leave her marriage, no matter how passionately she feels for Oliver, and she doubts his own devotion can last.

Then Oliver commits a spontaneous and seemingly harmless act, setting in motion a series of unforeseeable events that lead him to Sophie Klein. A graduate student in history and an idiosyncratic heiress, Sophie is engaged to Marian's pompous cousin, Bart. Oliver's deception eventually builds to a startling confrontation, bringing harsh truths to light and forcing Marian, Oliver, and Sophie to each evaluate what they're seeking from life --- and to learn that love, like even the most beautiful of blooms, is often transient.

With **The White Rose**, which was inspired by Richard Strauss's opera *Der Rosenkavalier*, Jean Hanff Korelitz has crafted both a thought-provoking treatise on social mores and a compelling page-turner.

Discussion Guide

1. From the opening page to the closing scene, white roses appear throughout the story. How does the symbolism of the white rose factor into the novel? What do they mean to Oliver in particular?

2. The White Rose opens with a scene told from Marian's perspective, making her the first character the reader gets to know. Yet by the time the novel comes to a close, the emphasis has shifted to Oliver. Why do you think the author chose to do this? Is **The White Rose** more one character's story than another?

3. Oliver is twenty-two years Marian's junior. In one instance he says to her, "I'd marry you today if I could. I have no problem with the age thing, you know I don't. I only mention it because I don't want to ignore that it's problematic for you." Why is the difference in their ages more of an issue for Marian than it is for Oliver?

4. Discuss marriage as it's presented in the novel, including Sophie's reasons for agreeing to marry Bart and why Marian refuses to end her marriage to Marshall.

5. How does Oliver's impulsive decision to masquerade as "Olivia" alter the events in the story? Why does he continue with the deception and especially to such an elaborate extent? Were you surprised by Marian's passionate response to Oliver when he was dressed in her clothing?

6. When Marian first reads the letter from Soriah she sets it aside, and there is no indication that she intends to take further action. Were you surprised to then learn she had arranged to meet Soriah and the resulting relationship that develops? What compels Marian to take on Soriah as a foster child?

7. Twice Sophia has the chance to introduce herself to Marian --- in the history department at Columbia University and on the street near Bloomingdales. Why does she let both opportunities go by without saying anything? What holds her back?

8. The White Rose is a re-imagining of the Strauss opera *Der Rosenkavalier*, which is about a man who must choose between two lovers --- an older woman and one nearer his own age. Does knowing this give you a different perspective on the story? In what ways?

9. Religion is a pervasive theme in the book. How do Marian, Oliver, and Sophie each view their Jewish heritage? In what ways do they draw on and/or deny the Jewish religion and its role in their lives?

10. The novelist and critic Edmund White said that in **The White Rose** Jean Hanff Korelitz "manages to talk about the gripping topics of our day, including race, wealth, aging, and our historical legacy." How does each of these topics play out in the storyline?

Author Bio

Jean Hanff Korelitz is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the novels THE LATECOMER; THE PLOT and its follow-up, THE SEQUEL; YOU SHOULD HAVE KNOWN (which aired on HBO in October 2020 as "The Undoing," starring Nicole Kidman, Hugh Grant and Donald Sutherland); ADMISSION (adapted as a film in 2013 starring Tina Fey) *;* THE DEVIL AND WEBSTER; THE WHITE ROSE; THE SABBATHDAY RIVER; and A JURY OF HER PEERS,

as well as INTERFERENCE POWDER, a novel for children. Her company BOOKTHEWRITER hosts Pop-Up Book Groups in which small groups of readers discuss new books with their authors. She lives in New York City with her husband, Irish poet Paul Muldoon.

Critical Praise

"Korelitz is a strong writer...capable of descriptions that are hers alone."

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