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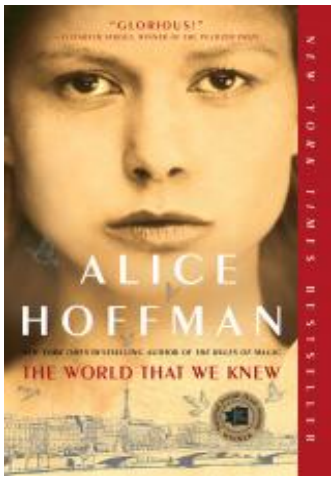
The World That We Knew

by Alice Hoffman



About the Book

In 1941, during humanity?s darkest hour, three unforgettable young women must act with courage and love to survive, from the *New York Times* bestselling author of THE DOVEKEEPERS and THE MARRIAGE OF OPPOSITES, Alice Hoffman.

In Berlin, at the time when the world changed, Hanni Kohn knows she must send her 12-year-old daughter away to save her from the Nazi regime. She finds her way to a renowned rabbi, but it?s his daughter, Ettie, who offers hope of salvation when she creates a mystical Jewish creature, a rare and unusual golem, who is sworn to protect Lea. Once Ava is brought to life, she and Lea and Ettie become eternally entwined, their paths fated to cross, their fortunes linked.

Lea and Ava travel from Paris, where Lea meets her soulmate, to a convent in western France known for its silver roses; from a school in a mountaintop village where 3,000 Jews were saved. Meanwhile, Ettie is in hiding, waiting to become the fighter she?s destined to be.

What does it mean to lose your mother? How much can one person sacrifice for love? In a world where evil can be found at every turn, we meet remarkable characters who take us on a stunning journey of loss and resistance, the fantastical and the mortal, in a place where all roads lead past the Angel of Death and love is never-ending.

Discussion Guide

1. This novel is both historical fiction and magical realism. How does Alice Hoffman achieve her unique writing style? What details does she use from each genre? What do each add to the emotional content of the story?

2. After reading the novel, re-examine the title. Consider who ?we? refers to in relation to the story and to your own life.

3. How do you feel about Ava?s relationship with the heron? Has an animal ever affected your spiritual life? Are emotions bound to human experience?

4. In one of the darkest periods of human history, why do the characters still yearn to live even as the world is falling apart? What makes life precious? Is it love, family, memory, hope?

5. In fairy tales, beasts are often humane, and humans are often cruel. In THE WORLD THAT WE KNEW, the same is true. Discuss this theme in the novel and in your favorite fairy tales.

6. Julien and Victor Levy are brothers with very different paths. How does each handle their wartime experience? What do they share despite their differences, and what aspects of their past influences them most?

7. Marianne initially leaves her father?s farm ?to find something that belonged to her and her alone? (99), which leads her to Paris. Despite ending up where she began, do you think she has achieved this goal? Why or why not? Did her love story surprise you? What do you think the future holds for her?

8. We learn halfway through the book that Hanni instructed her daughter to destroy Ava once Lea is brought to safety. Why do you think Lea defies her mother? Do you think she made the right decision? What may have changed her mind?

9. The book begins with Hanni making a great sacrifice to save her daughter and ends with Ava doing the same. What do these women share? Is it possible to love someone else?s children as if they were your own?

10. Ava is a golem, a mysterious creature of Jewish legend, controlled by her maker and created to do another?s bidding, but something changes. She longs for free will. Do you think she finds it?

11. Ettie yearns to be a scholar and a rabbi, but because she?s female these goals are unavailable to her. How does she create her own fate, and what leads her to rebel against the constraints of gender and history? Does war create opportunities for women to act outside of conventional roles?

12. Lea?s mother?s voice is heard throughout the novel in the italicized sections. The loss of a mother and the loss of a child is central to the story. How are the long-lasting effects of loss woven through the novel?

13. Can Ava posses a soul due to her ability to love? How does love change a world of hate, and how does it affect the characters in the novel?

Author Bio

Alice Hoffman is the author of more than 30 works of fiction, including WHEN WE FLEW AWAY, THE WITCHES OF CAMBRIDGE, THE INVISIBLE HOUR, THE BOOK OF MAGIC, MAGIC LESSONS: The Prequel to *Practical Magic*, THE WORLD THAT WE KNEW, THE RULES OF MAGIC, FAITHFUL, THE MARRIAGE OF OPPOSITES, THE MUSEUM OF EXTRAORDINARY THINGS, THE DOVEKEEPERS, PRACTICAL MAGIC, THE RED GARDEN, and the Oprah's Book Club selection HERE ON EARTH. She lives near Boston.

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