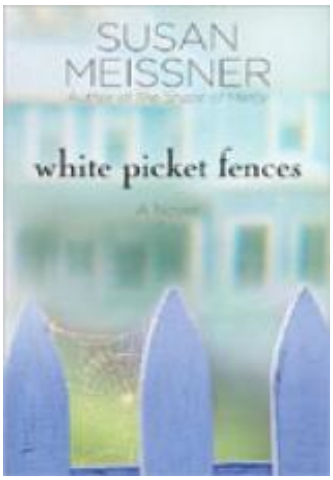
ReadingGroupGuides
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White Picket Fences

by Susan Meissner



About the Book

When her black sheep brother disappears, Amanda Janvier eagerly takes in her sixteen year-old niece Tally. The girl is practically an orphan: motherless, and living with a father who raises Tally wherever he lands? in a Buick, a pizza joint, a horse farm?and regularly takes off on wild schemes. Amanda envisions that she, her husband Neil, and their two teenagers can offer the girl stability and a shot at a ?normal? life, even though their own storybook lives are about to crumble.

Seventeen-year-old Chase Janvier hasn?t seen his cousin in years, and other than a vague curiosity about her strange life, he doesn?t expect her arrival will affect him much?or interfere with his growing, disturbing interest in a long-ago house fire that plagues his dreams unbeknownst to anyone else.

Tally and Chase bond as they interview two Holocaust survivors for a sociology project, and become startlingly aware that the whole family is grappling with hidden secrets, with the echoes of the past, and with the realization that ignoring tragic situations won?t make them go away.

Will Tally?s presence blow apart their carefully-constructed world, knocking down the illusion of the white picket fence and reveal a hidden past that could destroy them all?or can she help them find the truth without losing each other?

Discussion Guide

1. Amanda thinks she has the perfect home while Tally's life lacks stability and safety. How do you see this actually being reversed in the story?

2. Why do you think Chase named the fire Ghost? Why might he have felt the need to give the fire a name?

3. What is the significance of Neil's occupation as a financial planner? What do you think that career choice says about him?

4. Do you have any sympathy for Neil's character and the choices he made? Why or why not?

5. What do you think of Bart's parenting skills? Is he a bad father? How do his parenting skills compare with Amanda and Neil's?

6. Why do you think Chase dreamed of Eliasz coming to him in the fire?

7. What, if anything, do Josef and Eliasz represent to Chase? To Tally?

8. Do you envision Bart eventually finding the jewelry and gold? How do you see the imagined outcome affecting him?

9. Josef says in the last chapter, "[This] is what all survivors must decide. We have to decide how much we will choose to remember and how much courage we are willing to expend to do so." What do you think he means? Do you agree?

10. Did Neil and Amanda make a mistake by never mentioning the fire again after Chase stopped talking about it?

11. Why do you think Chase didn't care for woodworking and instead turned to film-making? Are these two pursuits similar in any way?

12. Are some secrets good to keep? How do we know which ones are meant to be kept?

Author Bio

Susan Meissner is a former managing editor of a weekly newspaper and an award-winning columnist. She is the *USA Today* bestselling author of A MAP TO PARADISE, ONLY THE BEAUTIFUL, THE NATURE OF FRAGILE THINGS, THE LAST YEAR OF THE WAR, AS BRIGHT AS HEAVEN, A BRIDGE ACROSS THE OCEAN, SECRETS OF A CHARMED LIFE, A FALL OF MARIGOLDS and STARS OVER SUNSET BOULEVARD, among other novels.

Critical Praise

"Susan Meissner just keeps getting better and better. This novel is a deftly woven portrayal of family and friendships, of secrets and sacrifices, one that tiptoes beyond the white picket fence to look at what happens when people stop talking to each other."

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