

Library for the War-Wounded

Monika Helfer

About the book

In *Library for the War-Wounded*, award-winning writer Monika Helfer mines her own history to tell the story of a family living in Austria in the aftermath of World War II. Through fractured memories, the novel follows the life of Josef from his daughter Monika's perspective.

Josef's childhood is difficult, but he finds joy in learning, literature, and old books. His education is interrupted when he is drafted to fight for the Wehrmacht at the Eastern Front and loses a leg in combat. After marrying his nurse and starting a family, he is invited to run a convalescent home for the war-wounded up in the mountains. The grateful father of a severely injured veteran gifts an impressive library to the home and, through losses big and small, Josef turns to the books for comfort and escape. Monika learns that some wounds can be healed, while others cannot. *Library for the War-Wounded* explores familial love, trauma, and the power of literature.

For discussion

1. On the opening page, Monika mentions a photograph of her father standing outside the convalescent home for the war-wounded. She comes back to this photograph several times throughout the novel. How do you understand its importance?
2. In the conversation that Monika has with her stepmother, which serves as a frame for the story, she says she is writing a novel about her father. Her stepmother asks, "True or made-up?" and Monika answers, "Both, but more true than made-up." How did her answer influence your reading of this novel?
3. When describing Josef, Monika often hovers between seriousness and whimsy, as when she writes: "Even as a child my father was a person who commanded respect. I suspect this was because he always spoke calmly." How do you imagine Josef's child self? How do other characters treat him? In what ways does he "command respect" as an adult?
4. Josef tells Monika, "When you look at a library, you know all there is to know about the person who owns them." Do you agree? What does your personal library reveal about you?
5. Monika's sister Renate says of their mother, Grete, "Maybe she imagined herself to be someone who is needed rather than loved?" Is this insight borne out in Grete's relationships with her husband and children? How so?
6. Monika enjoys the company of the veterans who visited the convalescent home but also describes them as "Those whom people would rather not see. Because they were a reminder of the war. They stood in the way." Do you see evidence of this attitude in the novel? Do you see it in the world today?
7. Why do you think Josef asks Monika to help him bury the library's books instead of doing it alone?
8. How did Monika and her sisters' experience after their mother's death differ from Richard's?
9. Monika says that she has never gone into the forest again to look for the buried books. Why do you think she made this choice? Did it surprise you?

10. Josef has a breakdown after Grete's death and is sent to live with nuns. How do you think he would have been cared for if this were to happen today?
11. When Monika and her dad are discussing his life, she realizes: "He can never say the really important things. He has to use a book as an intermediary. Always." Why do you think Josef does this? How does it relate to his love of libraries?
12. How did the stepmother's character unfold throughout the novel? How do you think Monika felt about her in the end?
13. The characters carry wounds of various kinds—physical, psychological, and emotional. How do different characters deal differently with their wounds?
14. The narrator occasionally interrupts the story to discuss the act of writing it. How did those moments affect your reading?
15. There are no chapter breaks throughout the novel. Why do you think the author chose to do this?

Recommended reading

Last House Before the Mountain by Monika Helfer, *Soldier from the War Returning: The Greatest Generation's Troubled Homecoming from World War II* by Thomas Childers, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel van der Kolk, *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien, *Books for Living* by Will Schwalbe, *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak, *The Library Book* by Susan Orlean, *The Library: A Fragile History* by Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen