

*The Vanishing Sky*  
L. Annette Binder

The following questions are intended to enhance your discussion of L. Annette Binder's *The Vanishing Sky*.

### **About this book**

In 1945, as the war in Germany nears its violent end, the Huber family is not yet free of its dangers or its insidious demands. Etta, a mother from a small, rural town, has two sons serving their home country: her elder, Max, on the Eastern front, and her younger, Georg, at a school for Hitler Youth. When Max returns from the front, Etta quickly realizes that something is not right—he is thin, almost ghostly, and behaving very strangely. Etta strives to protect him from the Nazi rule, even as her husband, Josef, becomes more nationalistic and impervious to Max's condition. Meanwhile, miles away, Georg has taken his fate into his own hands, deserting his young class of battle-bound soldiers to set off on a long and perilous journey home.

*The Vanishing Sky* is a story of the irreparable damage of war on the home front, and one family's participation—involuntary, unseen, or direct—in a dangerous regime. Drawing inspiration from her father's own story, L. Annette Binder has crafted a spellbinding novel about the choices we make for country and for family.

### **For discussion**

1. Books, magazines, and letters appear in various forms throughout the novel. Sometimes they are hidden away, and other times they themselves become a hiding place for something else. What role does reading and sharing stories play in the novel? How do books, magazines, and letters help bring the characters closer together? In what ways do they create distance between the characters?
2. When Etta remembers Willi, the old man who drowned in the river, she thinks that she and her friends had done a tremendous wrong that day and that this wrong could not “be righted in the telling” (page 122). Do you agree with her conclusion? In what ways could the horror of that day have been mitigated if she or one of the other kids had come forward? In what ways is what happened to Willi and the secrecy afterward similar to what happened during the Holocaust?
3. The Huber men are part of official, or semi-official, war efforts. What's the difference between working as a soldier, a youth trainee, and an elderly volunteer? What obligations do Josef, Max, and Georg feel to the German homeland?

4. How does Josef feel about Max's return home, and how does Etta believe Josef feels about it? What events in Josef's past shed light on his nationalist anger during the Second World War?
5. Eventually, Josef, Max, and Georg leave their posts. Which duties do they uphold, and which do they neglect, after their service is over?
6. With so many men gone to fight, the women who are left must often rely on each other. In which ways do women support each other? In which ways do they undercut each other?
7. How did Max treat Georg when they lived together in Heidenfeld? How do the boys of the Hitler Youth treat Georg? What do these relationships tell us about difference, belonging, and friendship in the novel?
8. An early title for the novel was Mutti, which means "mom" in German. Mothers play a key role in the story, and both Etta and Georg think of returning to their mothers as they navigate the difficult days just before and after the German defeat in the war. What does it mean when Etta returns to her Mutti after the city has been bombed? Why do you think the writer chose to end the scene in this way?
9. "Of all the gifts his uncle had sent, Georg loved the coins the best" (21). What do coin tricks mean to Georg, and how do they connect to his former life in Heidenfeld? How does Georg respond when he loses his coins to the American soldier, after having protected them during his flight from the Westwall?
10. The novel is narrated in the third person, but it begins as if over Etta's shoulder. Which other characters are part of this mode of narration (called "close" or "focalized")? And which are described more distantly, without access to their thoughts? How do these modes of narration affect the telling of the story?
11. Compare and contrast Georg's relationships with Frau Focht and Ingrid. What do they give him, how do they help him, and what dangers do they warn him of? What does Georg feel when he leaves them?
12. What's the role of Roman Catholicism in the novel, and which characters are most observant? What does Georg's conversation with Father Zimmermann (212–15) tell us about the intertwining of church and state in Nazi Germany?
13. The Americans bring evidence of the Shoah to the captured Germans (275–76). In what ways does the novel refer to the murder of Jews, the Roma, and the disabled? How do Georg and the other boys respond when they learn of these horrors?

**Further reading**

*The Reader*, Bernhard Schlink; *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, John Boyne; *Rise*, L. Annette Binder; *Warlight*, Michael Ondaatje; *The Invisible Bridge*, Julie Orringer; *The Book of Aron*, Jim Shepard; *All the Light We Cannot See*, Anthony Doerr; *My Own Dear Brother*, Holly Müller.

For first-hand accounts of life in the Hitler Youth and the strategic Allied bombings of German cities: <http://lannettebinder.com/sources.html>