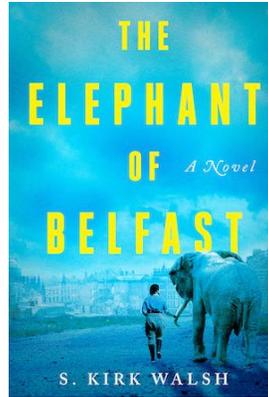


Discussion Guide: *THE ELEPHANT OF BELFAST* by S. Kirk Walsh



Thank you for reading! We hope you enjoyed S. Kirk Walsh's debut novel, *The Elephant of Belfast*, and found it thought-provoking. Below are some topics to consider and questions to discuss.

1. During WWII women were finally breaking into the workforce with the drafting of men into the war. What challenges did Hettie face in becoming the zoo's first female zookeeper? Why do you think advancement opportunities in the workforce were only made available to women in the absence of men? What challenges have you faced and overcome in the workforce?
2. Chapter Four begins with, "Air-raid drills became routine, and the familiar sirens frequently whined across the sweep of winter sky. A smattering of pedestrians got into the habit of carrying gas masks" (p. 64).

How was the war represented in *The Elephant of Belfast*? Did the danger feel ever-present during your reading? Why or why not?

3. Like Violet, the snail Ferris gives to Hettie endures an interesting journey throughout *The Elephant of Belfast*. On pages 166-167, we see Hettie and Rose interact with the snail: "Hettie positioned it on the kitchen table and stared at the concentric circles of the mollusk's design. The evening light struck the shell, intensifying its pink iridescence before its smooth surface became flat again. The snail's antennae tentatively emerged from its chamber and waved in the air. She smiled to herself. The snail extended its dark neck and wriggled its antennae farther. Hettie retrieved a few leaves from a celery stalk in the larder and placed them next to it, and it began to munch away on one of the leaves. . . . Hettie continued to watch the snail eat the remaining leaves as her mother made her rhubarb pie. The comforting sounds of domesticity took over the kitchen. . . . After the snail finished eating, the creature returned to the safety of its shell."

Animals have long been metaphoric in literature (*Moby Dick's* white whale, *The Old Man and the Sea's* great fish). Discuss what the snail symbolizes to Hettie. What could the young elephant, Violet, represent?

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4. Consider the following passage:

“During her time at the zoo, Hettie had noted this about Mr. Wright: He often spoke with more kindness to the animals than he did to people” (p. 9).

Hettie and Mr. Wright butt heads in the beginning but come to realize they are more similar than they are different. Discuss the choices made by Mr. Wright and Hettie. How might one character be reflected in the other?

5. How did relations between Protestants and Catholics change throughout the book?
6. Hettie has a complicated relationship with both her mother and father. Though her father abandoned their family, Hettie remembers him fondly, saying, “If he were still around, he would have been supportive of her new position despite the low salary and meager hours” (p. 30).

Why does Hettie’s view of her parents change throughout the novel? How do her experiences inform her outlook on Anna and Liam’s marriage and Liam’s relationship with Maeve?

7. Hettie finds herself attracted to three different men throughout the course of the novel—Ferris, Liam, and Samuel. What did Hettie learn about herself while exploring these relationships?

8. Consider the following passage:

“God knows we need more women to lead us these days. Look at the mess the world is in, and it’s all because of men Hitler, Stalin, Churchill, and, nearer home, Craigavon. They’re brutal, insensitive, arrogant. They never go down on their knees and pray, and consider the will of God, or think how what they’re doing will affect the women, their sisters, wives and mothers, and the wee children” (p. 245).

How are the women portrayed in the novel in comparison to the men? Are there any reversals? Anything surprising?

9. Discuss the Protestant/Catholic conflict in the narrative. Were you surprised that the Troubles played a role during WWII and the fight against the Germans?

10. Consider the following passage:

“Here was Violet...Mr. Wright, the head zookeeper, stood at the foot of the gangplank. Two reporters appeared by his side and scribbled in their notepads as Mr. Wright kept his gaze fixed on Violet. The elephant hovered, her feet hanging in midair, her flap-like ears pinned against her head. There was another collective sigh as she lifted her trunk and produced a high-pitched whistle. The elephant’s cry tumbled over the crowd” (p. 4).

Do you remember your first encounter with an elephant or another wild animal? How

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would you describe it?

11. Consider the following passage:

“Hettie felt she had entered a dream, crossed over a threshold into another reality, where citizens weren’t dying and homes weren’t being destroyed and the sky wasn’t on fire. Instead, it was only Stella Holliday and her extraordinary song. ‘She says she’s gonna sing until the bombs stop falling,’ said a man who stood by the entrance. ‘Lots of people ran for the shelters, but I think it’s safer here. Listen to her. Look at her.’ . . . Hettie thought Stella looked as though she were dedicating every cell and fiber of her body to her song . . .” (p. 181-182).

Music is included throughout *The Elephant of Belfast*. Is there a song or singer who you turn to in hard times? Why do you choose this particular piece of music? If possible, play your songs for each other.