

Reader's Guide for Motherland

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean when you cannot go home again—when you cannot face the past that has rendered you homeless? In 1938, with the threat of World War II forcing them out of their homes, Frieda and Siegmund Westerfeld placed their twelve-year-old daughter Edith on an ocean liner bound from Germany to America, with several other Jewish children destined to become orphaned refugees. Edith never saw her parents again. They both died in Nazi death camps before the war was over.

Edith's life in America was shaped by loss. Without homeland or family, she lacked proof, and witness, of her childhood. At the age of sixty-five, long after her parents would have died of old age had they not perished in the war, she finally agreed to revisit her small hometown of Stockstadt, Germany. Her daughter, journalist Fern Schumer Chapman, accompanied her.

This story—the one that Chapman has been waiting her entire life to write—shows how memories can build an identity, as well as set a life adrift. As an adult, Chapman's mother had locked her childhood memories away—remembering was too painful. Edith believed that Fern would be able to transcend the past, while she herself felt she did not deserve true happiness.

The return to Edith's homeland, or "motherland," is both a physical and metaphorical journey. The "motherland" is a country of the heart, the landscape of a universal maternal love. In one riveting conversation, Fern asks her mother: Had Edith been in her parents' place, would she, too, be able to perform the ultimate sacrifice—sending Fern away forever, orphaning a child to save her life? Is wanting, at any cost, a better life for your children selfless or selfish?

Chapman's memoir evokes the legacy of war, passed down unknowingly through generations. Parenting, she writes, is an opportunity for redemption. Pregnant with her third child at the time of the trip, she hopes to repair the mistakes of other generations and provide her children with a life "free of war." Returning to Germany, then, is a repossession of the past, reincarnating it on new terms. Going "beyond" the Holocaust is moving beyond death in order to reclaim a sense of memory and self. For Fern and Edith, the trip is also a chance for their own redemption. By finding out more about her mother's hidden and powerful past, Fern slowly begins to understand her mother's silence and to rebuild their relationship.

The townspeople of Stockstadt stared at Edith as if they were seeing a ghost. In over fifty years, nobody had left the town except for its two Jewish families: Edith's and her cousin's, pushed out during the Nazi reign. At an organized reunion of Edith's elementary class, taut with high emotion and trepidation, the attendees include the sons and daughters of some of the town's most notorious Nazis—those dubbed the "lucky late-born" because they were not old enough to personally participate in the crimes themselves. Yet "luck" here is a superficial and loaded term. Neither Edith, nor Fern, nor the residents of Stockstadt have escaped the war's effects. There are no more "good Germans;" stewing in collective guilt, everyone has been tainted with the horrors of the past. Many classmates do not show up to the reunion, and people turn away when Edith asks for directions to the town's Jewish cemetery. "We didn't know," her former classmates say. "We were only children." By not confronting the past, they avoid remembering a painful time; rebuff any complicity in the Westerfelds' fate. Perhaps it is denial. Or perhaps it is impossible to separate the true collaborators from the unknowing conformists.

Mina, the Westerfelds' young live-in housekeeper during Edith's childhood, is one German who refused to forget. When Edith visits her, now an old woman living in a dilapidated mountain house, for the first time since the war, it is Edith's turn to say that she "did not know" what life was really like for Mina. Continuing to work for the Westerfelds long after it was acceptable in Germany for non-Jews to associate with Jewish families, Mina's anti-Nazi leanings branded her for life: scorned during the war as a Jewish sympathizer, and later, for being a voice of courage in a country deep in denial.

At her cluttered kitchen table, Mina delivers details from nearly a half-century ago as if they happened yesterday, pulling out yellowed papers to pass onto Fern and her children. She—like Edith and Fern and their tour guide, Stockstadt's local historian, Hans Herrmann—never truly let go of the past. For decades, haunted by his own part in the war, Hans had replayed a similar mental reel of his mistakes. His obsession with the past impeded his own ability to live in the present.

Nobody, as Mina's son Jurgen notes, "*comes out of this clean . . . not even the children.*" But providing her children with a clean slate is exactly what Chapman strives to do. Standing in the basement of her childhood home, now a storefront, Edith hears her own mother calling her, a voice traveling across generations and across time. In Germany, Fern learns that the past had always been alive within her mother, right under the surface of the present. Fern's grandparents had lived on, preserved in her memory.

Motherland teaches that remembering can be a burden or a blessing: the past can tear people apart, stunt them with regret, paralyze them with pain. However, it also demonstrates that each generation has a responsibility to remember, to reshape wounding memories into redemption and knowledge.

Questions for Reading Groups to Consider:

1. What are your feelings towards Hans, and how do they change throughout the book?
2. Why is Hans unwilling to go with Edith and Fern to find Mina? Edith keeps everything in and Mina talks incessantly about the past. Is one coping mechanism better than another?
3. How do you think you would cope with this kind of traumatic past? Can you understand the Westerfelds' decision to remain in Germany with Sara? Did they do the right thing?
4. What choice would you make? Edith's anger isn't focused on the Nazis. It is directed at her parents. Can you understand why she feels this way?
5. Why was it so important for Fern to have a daughter?

6. What stories, legends and history would you like to pass along to your children?
7. Why is Juergen so important to the story?
8. What does he add? What is the larger point of the book?
9. What role should the past play in present life? In what ways does the mother/daughter relationship in Motherland illuminate your relationship with your mother?