

1. Guilt is a theme that is woven throughout the book. Nathan's guilt at having "abandoned" his family to their fates; Leo (the survivor's) guilt at being unworthy of the medal his daughter finds and being called a hero. Even Greta's guilt in taking on her husband's crimes. How is guilt assuaged in the story, or overcome? Does Nathan put it behind him at the end? Does Leo? Greta? Does survivor guilt carried through as life honor those dead? Or does it simply infect the life that is saved?

2. The novel tiptoes a narrow line between heroism and atrocity. In the camp, graphic things occur, but it is all a backdrop to Nathan's central mission. Did this give a sense of realism for you? Was that balance okay? Did the book succeed as a thriller and as a novel of broader themes, or was it held back in some way because of its suspense? Was the ending life-affirming to you? Or demoralizing?

3. This novel represented a large departure from Gross's previous work, both in setting and style. What level of historical responsibility is there in a work on this subject, the Holocaust, that maybe isn't there on a traditional thriller? Do you think a different fidelity to actual events is necessary? What would you imagine the author has learned from constructing this story about his own family, or such a unsettling event in his religion's history?

4. There was a good amount of science presented in the book. The author claims he felt it necessary to take the reader through it so as to show why it was so important Alfred, or his knowledge, survive. Was it necessary? Was it presented in an entertaining way-- in the back and forth between Leo and Alfred? And what does the playing of chess mean in the book, especially for Greta? Why is the "game" so important to her? And what is it about Leo she grows so fond of?

5. A good thriller has been described as one in which the stakes keep rising as the story unfolds, until they are greater than any individual character's plight. What are the real "stakes" for the main characters? Does the thriller aspect of the story deepen or diminish these stakes? Do you feel what is at stake for Nathan deeper than the threat faced to the Allies if Mendl's knowledge does not get out?

6. FDR is thought of as one of our greatest "humanitarian" presidents, a hero of the common man. Yet in the book (and in history) he is shown to have a questionable support at best for the plight of European Jews. Does this notion challenge your views of this famous leader? How would things have been different if FDR had acted and perhaps bombed the tracks or the camps? With today's knowledge, are you comfortable with his inaction, given what he was trying to protect?

7. Nathan goes to great lengths to rescue Professor Mendl from Auschwitz. When Captain Strauss asks him why he agreed to the mission, he says "It was for this reason that man was first created as one person, to teach you that anyone who destroys a life is considered by Scripture to have destroyed an entire world; and any who saves a life, is as if he saved an entire world." What do you think of this? How much of Nathan's reasoning for the mission is dependent on this theology?

8. Responsibility is a major theme throughout the book. Nathan feels responsible for his family's deaths, Mendl feels responsible for carrying his work through the war, Leo feels responsible for Mendl. How much does this notion affect the characters' decisions for their own well-beings? What versions of this trait do you see in your own lives?

9. The concept of what a life is worth comes up often in the book. Within the camp, prisoners and guards barter in order to purchase everything from extra food to their lives. Nathan thinks to himself saving one life is saving all humanity and later is unable to shoot the driver, even though he knows it may cost him the mission. How do you think that the value of life is evaluated in this book? Is it possible for life to mean as much after the atrocities of the camp.

10. Shetman has been in Auschwitz since the beginning of the war, which gives him a certain liberty that other prisoners don't have. What do you make of how he treats his own life and those around him? Are his motivations simply altruistic?

11. The prospect of "giving up" looms in the background of this novel; giving up the mission, giving up hope, giving up life. How do characters like Nathan, Mendl, and Greta decide when enough is enough? Does this further the plot or determine their character?

12. Greta and Leo play chess together weekly, though eventually we learn that Greta has grown fond of the boy rather than just enjoying the game. Is Greta actually in love with Nathan, or does she just feel guilty for the work her husband does? How does she ultimately find redemption or not? Can you justify her final act?

13. Franke emerges as a major villain in the story, even as we learn how abuse and neglect made him into such a reviled person. How do we view evil in this book? How can one person represent the evil of a regime? Should he?

14. Knowledge is the ultimate goal of many characters in this book. The lengths to which the US government goes just to extract Mendl's knowledge from Europe are astounding. Knowing inside information in the camp can keep a prisoner alive longer or grant him or her certain liberties. How does knowledge function in the text? At what point is knowledge not enough?

15. What do you think about the way the book ends? Is Nathan redeemed in his own mind by dying in Poland to let his sister escape? Is it more or less believable than if he had survived? Does the later marriage of Leo and Leisa ring true or do you think their relationship is based more on shared experience than romantic feeling?

16. Leo tells this story from the remove of several decades when his daughter visits him in a nursery home. Why do you think he waited until now to tell the story? What do you think is gained or lost from this distance?