

In This Grave Hour

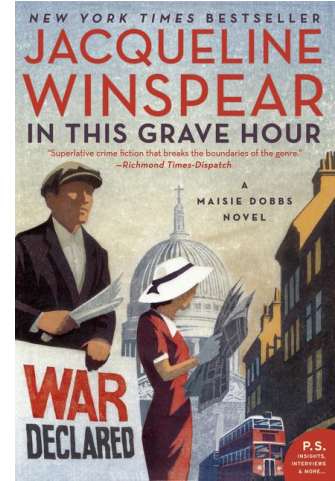
Harper Perennial

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Introduction

Sunday, September 3rd, 1939. At the moment, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain broadcasts to the nation Britain's declaration of war with Germany, a senior Secret Service agent breaks into Maisie Dobbs' flat to await her return. Dr. Francesca Thomas has an urgent assignment for Maisie: to find the killer of a man who escaped occupied Belgium as a boy, some twenty-three years earlier during the Great War.



In a London shadowed by barrage balloons, bomb shelters and the threat of invasion, within days another former Belgian refugee is found murdered. And as Maisie delves deeper into the killings of the dispossessed from the “last war,” a new kind of refugee — an evacuee from London — appears in Maisie's life. The little girl billeted at Maisie's home in Kent does not, or cannot, speak, and the authorities do not know who the child belongs to or who might have put her on the “Operation Pied Piper” evacuee train. They know only that her name is Anna.

As Maisie's search for the killer escalates, the country braces for what is to come. Britain is approaching its gravest hour — and Maisie could be nearing a crossroads of her own.

Questions for Discussion

1. Maisie often reflects back on the ideas and teachings of Maurice. Which of these seem particularly valuable?
2. Why does Maisie like to make a “case map” when solving a crime? What is it about such an “act of creation” that aids such an undertaking?
3. Frankie Dobbs, Maisie's father, helps care for boys who have been temporarily billeted to Chelstone Manor, “without anyone losing their temper.” What does he understand about what the boys need?
4. What state is young Anna in when she arrives at the Manor? What might explain her silence or refusal to release her small case? Why might the story about the flying horse have appealed to her?
5. What in particular about Maisie's treatment of Anna gets the girl to eventually open up? How does this work psychologically?

6. What is Francesca Thomas like? How does Maisie's past experience with her influence their interaction and the job Maisie has agreed to do for her?
7. When a memory of the loss of her child "conspired to drag her under in a wave of grief," Maisie finds a way to "temper her breathing and gentle her mind." How does this physical response help with emotional turmoil?
8. Discussing the challenges of refugees, Mrs. Hartley-Davies suggests that, "you can always tell people who've been out of the little milieu they were born into." What might she mean? What are the particular effects of such travel or dislocation?
9. What does the character of Robert Miller, Rosie's brother, bring to the novel?
10. Beyond the physical and logistical, what are the emotional challenges for refugees? How might this affect their interaction with citizens of the host country?
11. Maisie admits that even in horrible times of war there were "times of laughter." How is that possible? What is the effect of laughter?
12. Maisie is cautious not to make "leaps of creative thought" when trying to understand people involved in her cases. What is she concerned about? What is the value of empathy in her work?
13. What's the relationship between grief and anger? What might Maisie mean when she says "forgiveness...is the only way to break free"?