

## To Die But Once

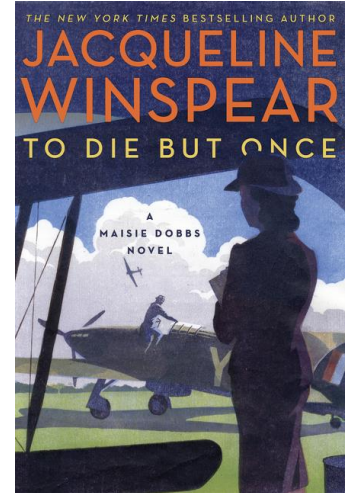
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### Introduction

During the months following Britain's declaration of war on Germany, Maisie Dobbs investigates the disappearance of a young apprentice working on a hush-hush government contract. As news of the plight of thousands of soldiers stranded on the beaches of France is gradually revealed to the general public, and the threat of invasion rises, another young man beloved by Maisie makes a terrible decision that will change his life forever.



Maisie's investigation leads her from the countryside of rural Hampshire to the web of wartime opportunism exploited by one of the London underworld's most powerful men, in a case that serves as a reminder of the inextricable link between money and war. Yet when a final confrontation approaches, she must acknowledge the potential cost to her future—and the risk of destroying a dream she wants very much to become reality.

### Questions for Discussion

1. As the novel begins, what's the "precarious position" the British expeditionary forces are in? How does this personally affect various characters? In what ways does it gradually affect Maisie Dobbs' investigation of Joe Coombes' death?
2. Phil Coombes' initial hesitation to talk with Maisie reminds her that, "not everyone in straightened circumstances wants to be helped." Why might this be?
3. Sandra suggests to Maisie that the Phil and Sally Coombes "love their children, but they've let what they've seen while working at the brewery get the better of them." What does she mean? When might the impulse to protect children and be strict become problematic?
4. In a state of extreme concern for his son, Billy says, "War's always the same." What does he mean?
5. Lord Julian, speaking of new Prime Minister Winston Churchill, says, "We now have a man who is up to the job of war." What necessary qualities did Churchill possess?
6. Thinking about war, Maisie remembers the phrase, "Where there's muck, there's brass." What does this mean? In what contexts other than war might it be applicable?

7. As Billy flashes back to his wartime service he tries to explain that, “it’s the waiting that makes a brave lad cave into himself.” What is so difficult and powerful about waiting? In what other instances does waiting prove a difficult task throughout the novel?
8. In what ways might Maisie’s tragic loss of her “family of three, beloved of each other” be affecting her? How did her work as a nurse in Spain help her to “come home to herself”?
9. In defense of Vivian’s harsh anger at her brother’s death, Maisie explains that, “we all have a different way of dealing with loss—and sometimes our ways clash.” Consider the many different characters that must confront loss throughout the novel? What are the various responses? Which seem the healthiest?
10. How might Maisie’s powerful feelings for Anna affect her throughout the investigation? How might adopting Anna change Maisie’s life?
11. Maisie finds that “physically gazing out at a landscape...could provide a broader view of the possibilities inspired by a question.” How might this work, psychologically?
12. Maisie and pathologist Clarissa Clark share an admiration for Dr. Blanche. In what other ways are the women similar? How would you interpret “forensic science of the whole person”?
13. During wartime, military information is released “bit by bit,” enough to inform, “but not enough to cause panic.” What is journalism’s role in a time of war? When, if ever, do you believe withholding information justified? When might such censorship be harmful?
14. However heroically motivated, was the decision by Tim and Gordon to sail to rescue British soldiers responsible? Of what symbolic importance is the name of their boat, Cassandra?
15. While searching the crime scene, desperately asking the deceased Joe for a clue, Maisie suddenly feels as if “struck by a piece of iron,” and finds the metal tag intended for Joe’s pup. How might you explain this experience of hers? Empathy? Imagination? Something paranormal?
16. When walking with Vivian Coombes, Maisie realizes that “so much was revealed in the way a person walked.” How is this so? How might the secrets Vivian was keeping have been revealed in her body language?
17. How does Maisie come to realize that her neighbor Walter Miles is a German spy?
18. In what various ways is the epigraph from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* explored throughout the novel?