

The Boat Runner

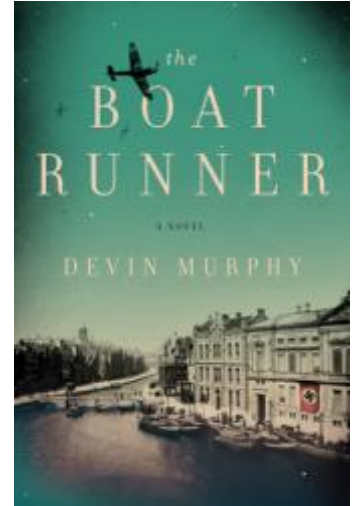
Harper Perennial

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ISBN: 9780062658012

Introduction

In the tradition of *All the Light We Cannot See* and *The Nightingale*, comes an incandescent debut novel about a young Dutch man who comes of age during the perilousness of World War II.



Beginning in the summer of 1939, fourteen-year-old Jacob Koopman and his older brother, Edwin, enjoy lives of prosperity and quiet contentment. Many of the residents in their small Dutch town have some connection to the Koopman lightbulb factory, and the locals hold the family in high esteem.

On days when they aren't playing with friends, Jacob and Edwin help their Uncle Martin on his fishing boat in the North Sea, where German ships have become a common sight. But conflict still seems unthinkable, even as the boys' father naively sends his sons to a Hitler Youth Camp in an effort to secure German business for the factory.

When war breaks out, Jacob's world is thrown into chaos. *The Boat Runner* follows Jacob over the course of four years, through the forests of France, the stormy beaches of England, and deep within the secret missions of the German Navy, where he is confronted with the moral dilemma that will change his life—and his life's mission—forever.

Epic in scope and featuring a thrilling narrative with precise, elegant language, *The Boat Runner* tells the little-known story of the young Dutch boys who were thrown into the Nazi campaign, as well as the brave boatmen who risked everything to give Jewish refugees safe passage to land abroad. Through one boy's harrowing tale of personal redemption, here is a novel about the power of people's stories and voices to shine light through our darkest days, until only love prevails.

Questions for Discussion

1. Jacob Koopman's mother is an organist, his brother is a brilliant painter, his father an inventor, and his uncle a mysterious fisherman. How do the identities of Jacob's closest relationships shape his own identity? How does that identity change over the course of the novel?

2. On page 25, Jacob describes himself feeling “like a meek little I’m-sorry machine. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’d chant ... I’d do this to try to keep the peace between everyone, though I hated every time the words crossed my lips.” When does this aspect of his character create challenges for him? How does his action or inaction shape his fate? When does Jacob first make a choice of his own?
3. Why is storytelling so important to Jacob? In what ways does the idea of storytelling surface in this novel? What do the recurrent Thump-drag stories add to the novel?
4. Most war stories portray allies and enemies, but in *The Boat Runner*, things are not as clear cut, and each character is held morally responsible for their own actions. What do you think the author hoped to achieve in doing this?
5. Of all the losses Jacob sustains in this story, what is the one loss that changes him the most? What is Jacob’s greatest personal strength?
6. Jacob Koopman is a complex character and is often shown in private moments struggling to do what’s right. What are some of the moral dilemmas Jacob must face? In what ways do the labels hero or villain describe him?
7. How does the persecution of Jews reveal itself in this book, and how does Jacob react to encountering this? Do his reactions change over the course of the novel?
8. Consider the idea of borders in this novel. The physical location of Jacob’s town sits on the edge of two countries as well as on the edge of land and water. Jacob is also on the border between boyhood and becoming a man. What are some of the other borders that Jacob encounters? How are these borders significant in understanding his character?
9. In what ways does the sea and shipping become an essential part of the novel? How did Uncle Martin and Jacob’s missions aboard ship complicate the story?

10. On page 353, the captain of The Royal Crest tells Jacob, “There will always be the business of refugees.” The Captain then tells him, “It’s been my experience that the incidents we can’t control make us who we are.” Is this true for Jacob? Is this true in your own life?
11. The war strips many things from Jacob and his family: wealth, prestige, art, work, nationality, self-respect, safety, and health. What do you think is important to Jacob by the end of the book, once everything is taken away from him? What will be his guiding principles? What will sustain him?
12. In what ways does the author try to make the reader see and feel the real cost of large scale conflict on a personal level? Is *The Boat Runner* a “war book”? Does it make a stance on the nature of war?
13. What are the most striking images that linger after finishing the novel? Which experiences do you think will stay with Jacob the most?
14. Of the many characters Jacob meets along his journey, which stand out the most to you? What makes them memorable?

If you were to talk to the author, what would you want to know? (Feel free to contact him at devinmurphyauthor@gmail.com or via his website at www.devinmurphyauthor.com.)