



## Zabelle

By Nancy Kricorian  
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### About this Guide

The material that follows is intended to enhance your group's discussion of Nancy Kricorian's ZABELLE. We hope they provide you with fresh ways of looking at this exceptional novel.

### About this Book

ZABELLE begins in a suburb of Boston, with the quiet death of Zabelle Chahasbanian, an elderly widow and grandmother. The story then quickly shifts back in time to Zabelle's childhood in the waning days of Ottoman Turkey, where she survives the 1915 Armenian Genocide and near starvation in the Syrian desert. Zabelle's journey encompasses years in an Istanbul orphanage, a fortuitous adoption by a rich Armenian family, and an arranged marriage to an Armenian grocer, who brings her to America. Through each of the often comic interactions and battles she wages in her new country—with a domineering mother-in-law, Americanized children, and the man she secretly loves—images and shadows from a long-lost world accompany her.

### Praise for this Book

"ZABELLE, like [Toni] Morrison's best work, is a lovely and artful piece...In spite of Zabelle's massive sweep, it's the intimacy and the care of the writing that truly impress." -*Time Out New York*

"Affecting...haunting and convincing...there's a fairy tale quality to the prose—a sense of wondrous and terrible things happening apart from human volition." -*The New Yorker*

"A mother is never truly known to those she loves most—because she does not reveal her secret sorrows and dreams to her own babies...But the full and dramatic details of Zabelle Chahasbanian's life...are a treasure to discover in this elegant novel." -*Redbook*

"Zabelle's story is rich and convincingly rendered...Zabelle poignantly renders the generational differences, the pull of America, the slow fading of the old culture, the prejudices encountered and the hardships overcome." -*San Francisco Chronicle*

"An epic tale told with admirable economy and grace...[Zabelle] is the kind of character who instantly captures your heart." -*The Baltimore Sun*

### Questions for Discussion:

1. The book's epigraph, *Three apples fell from heaven*, is a variation on the closing formula of an Armenian fairy tale, akin to "*and they all lived happily ever after*." Why do you think the author chose this epigraph?
2. The prologue begins by recounting Zabelle's story from the third person point of view, but in the first chapter, the narration shifts to first person as Zabelle tells her own life story. Why do you think the author chose to begin the story from this point of view? Why does she begin at the end of Zabelle's story, only to jump back to the beginning?
3. In the prologue, Zabelle searches for a tin cup, a hand mirror, a set of combs, a silver thimble, a brooch, and an envelope with a Worcester postmark. What is the significance of each of these objects?
4. After her mother dies in the desert, Zabelle's almost gives up her struggle to survive until Arsinee appears. Later in the book, Arsinee again appears at a critical moment. What roles do Zabelle and Arsinee play in each other's lives. What role does Arsinee play in the novel itself?
5. While the old country custom of "the bride has lost her tongue" (p. 63) was no longer formally practiced when Zabelle married Toros, how does this custom echo in Zabelle's dealings with her mother-in-law, Vartanoush? Is there any remnant in Zabelle's own attitude toward her daughter-in-law, Helen?
6. Zabelle's romance with Moses Bodjakanian at the shirt factory has as much to do with her unhappiness at home as it does with Moses himself. What does Moses represent to Zabelle?
7. Zabelle has different relationships with each of her three children—Moses, Jack, and Joy. How do her feelings toward each of them shape the directions of their lives? How are these relationships satisfying or disappointing to Zabelle? What about her relationships with her grandchildren?
8. While *Zabelle* is framed by a historical tragedy, the book is also full of humor—Moses' divine revelation about plastic surgery, the comic clash of cultures at Jack's wedding, the funny conversations between Zabelle and Arsinee. How does humor function in the novel?
9. When Joy asks her mother, "Do you love Pa?" (p. 208), Zabelle isn't sure how to answer, thinking, "It was like asking the elbow if it loves the wrist." How does the relationship between Zabelle and Toros change over the years? How does it compare to the courtship between Zabelle's parents described in the Epilogue?
10. The day before he dies, Toros confesses to Zabelle that he witnessed his father's murder and did nothing to help him (p. 223). This is the first time he has spoken of his experiences in the Genocide, and Zabelle, too, has always remained silent about that chapter in her own life. Why did they never discuss this tragedy? How did it permeate the atmosphere of their home?
11. The epilogue—a tale of Hadjin—is written in the style of a fairytale. Rather than telling the story of Zabelle's life, it returns to a previous generation to bring the

story full circle. What does the epilogue tell the reader about the way of life that was lost because of the Genocide? How does Zabelle "live to remember and forget the tale" (p. 237)? What does she remember and what does she forget?

**About the Author:**

NANCY KRICORIAN was raised in Watertown, Massachusetts, which has had a large Armenian community since the 1920s. With degrees from Dartmouth College and Columbia University, Kricorian is a widely published and award-winning poet who currently lives in New York City with her husband, James Schamus, and their two daughters.

**Author statement:**

I wrote *Zabelle* as a tribute to my grandmother, Mariam Kodjababian Kricorian, and to the Armenian women of her generation who were Genocide survivors, resourceful immigrant wives and mothers and the backbones of their families, churches, and communities, which were reconstituted in the New World. I also wanted to honor the memory of the lifelong friendship between my grandmother and Alice Kharibian, who had been with her in the desert. As we say in Armenian, *Bidi hishenk*. We will remember.

**About the Armenian Genocide:**

On April 24, 1915, more than 200 Armenian religious, political, and intellectual leaders were arrested in Constantinople (Istanbul), taken to the interior of Turkey and murdered. In the eight years that followed, from 1915 to 1923, 1.5 million Armenians perished, and more than 500,000 were exiled from their homes as part of a systematic campaign instituted by the Young Turk government. Before 1914, more than two million Armenians lived in Turkey. By the end of 1923, virtually the entire Armenian population of Anatolia, Western Armenia, and Cilicia had been either killed or deported.

**GLOSSARY OF ARMENIAN, TURKISH, AND ARABIC WORDS**

Aghchig, mayr, hayr unis?	little girl, do you have a mother or father?
aghchigs	my girl
Aman im	Mercy me
basterma	cured, spied beef
Bitdi, getdi	done and gone
beoregs	savory filled pastry
Cheh	no
cheoregs	sweet, yeasted rolls
Der Hayr	Father (to address priest)
dev	devil, monster
djinns	demons
dolma	stuffed vegetable
doshag	soft, rolled-up mattress
Eh leh lepeleh...	Turkish children's song
Esh	donkey, ass
gadu	cat
ghadayif	pastry of shredded wheat, honey, and nuts
ghurabia	butter cookie
hammam	Turkish bath
Hanum	Mistress
jajikh	cold yogurt-cucumber soup
jarbig	clever, resourceful
Khelatsi aghchigs	my beautiful girl
Khent ek?	Are you crazy? (plural)
Khent es?	Are you crazy? (singular)
kutfeh	Armenian meatball
lahmejun	Armenian pizza with ground beef or lamb
mantabour	dumpling soup
manti	dumpling
Mayrig	Mom
odar	non-Armenian
pakhlava	pastry of filo dough, honey and nuts
poghokagans	Protestants
saj	griddle
Shad keghetsig es	You are very beautiful
Shnorhagal em	Thank you
tahn	yogurt and water beverage
Vay	alas, oh
Vay babum	oh my father (idiom)
Voch	No

yavum	sweetie, my darling
Yes hay em	I am Armenian