

## Reading Guide

# The Last Train to London

Harper

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1. The book begins with words from Elie Wiesel’s Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech: “One person of integrity can make a difference.” What is integrity? In what ways is it challenging to possess? Where are there powerful examples of integrity in action throughout the novel?
2. Consider Geertruida Wijsmuller, Tante Truus to the children. What are her most impressive qualities? What makes her willing to take such risks to help the children? What skills make her so successful?
3. In what ways are the Neuman family and the Perger family similar or different? How does this affect the relationship between Stephan and Zofie-Helene?
4. In what ways is it significant that the young Stephan Neuman is a playwright? What are his goals and responsibilities as such? What other skills allow him to successfully survive his persecution?
5. How does Zofie-Helene, as a mathematics prodigy, process and articulate her experience in the world? In what ways might such abstract thinking be useful, especially in a time of fear and danger?
6. What does Käthe Perger work to accomplish as editor of the *Vienna Independent* newspaper? What is the role of the press in times of political and social unrest? Why is journalism seen as such a threat to the Nazis and other totalitarian regimes?
7. In what ways is paradox—*The Liar’s Paradox*, *The Theater Paradox*, *The Friendship Paradox*, etc.—relevant to the subject matter of the novel? What does paradox suggest about the nature of human experience?
8. Why might the stories of Sherlock Holmes be so important to Zofie-Helene? Why are they banned by the Nazi regime?
9. Why does Stephan’s Aunt Lisl value painting, in particular abstract painting? What does it mean that, “photos were somehow less true than...paintings, even though they were more real”? Why were “cubist and futurist and expressionist works” offensive—or even a threat—to Hitler?

10. In what complex ways were Tante Truus and her husband Joop influenced by their experience of three miscarriages? How might they have behaved differently if they had had children of their own?
11. What is so powerful and significant about Schubert's "Ave Maria" and other music mentioned throughout the novel? What might it mean that, for Zofie-Helene, "music fill[s] the empty spaces between the numbers and symbols inside her"?
12. What is the difference between propaganda and journalism? How was Hitler able to convince so many that "his lies are the truth and the truth is a lie"? How does modern communication technology including the Internet and social media make this more or less likely?
13. Truss learned from her father that "courage isn't the absence of fear, but rather going forward in the face of it." What might be other ways to define courage? What are effective ways to handle fear?
14. Consider the personal details of Adolf Eichmann's life before power—his time with Mischa Sebba, his being denied entrance into the Hotel Metropole, etc. How might these have influenced his ability to visit such terror on fellow humans? What's the relationship between personal experience and political leadership?
15. What might go into the profoundly difficult and complex decision for parents to send a child away that he or she might be safe?
16. What particular strengths does Ruchele Neuman exhibit? What went into her decision to send her sons, Stephan and Walter, to safety?
17. What is the role and value of literature to Stephan, his Aunt Lisl, and others? Why are the words of Stefan Zweig so comforting to Stephan, even when living in the tunnels beneath the streets?
18. Truss laments to her husband Joop that, "I'm a woman who can't bear children in a world that values nothing else from me." How does such a narrow, restrictive, even oppressive value system exist despite the many and important accomplishments of women? Which girls and women in the novel find ways to transcend such limits?
19. Zofie-Helene learns from her mother that "people never expect...a girl in charge" but that "it can work in her favor." What might this mean?
20. How is it that "decent German people" came to permit and witness and even participate in the violent persecution of their fellow citizens "like holiday makers at a fair ground"?
21. What is powerful and significant about the infinity necklace that Stephan returns to Zofie-Helene years after they are safe in England?
22. In what profound ways was Tante Truus the "Mother of 1001 children"? What did she understand about children, especially in such traumatic times? What is her legacy?