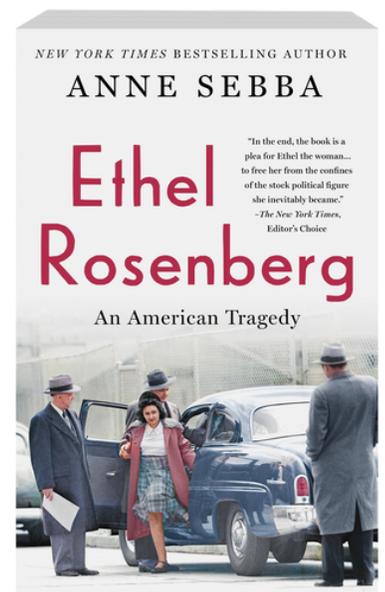


ETHEL ROSENBERG

Discussion Guide

1. Now that there is evidence that Julius Rosenberg was a spy and that Ethel Rosenberg knew what he was doing, do you believe that makes her guilty?
2. If Ethel was not required by law to report what she knew about the espionage activities of her husband, is she therefore innocent?
3. Do you think binary terms like “innocent” and “guilty” are still important in this situation?
4. Do you believe that remaining a communist after 1939 (when the Hitler-Stalin pact was announced) meant that it was impossible to call yourself a patriotic American? Or is the fact that the Soviet Union became an ally in 1941 more important?
5. Ethel is described in the book as “flawed” and “not a saint.” What do you think is her least attractive personality trait? Do you like her, and if not, why?
6. Why do you think so many books and plays about the Rosenbergs in the last seventy years have focused on Ethel more than Julius?
7. If you are a parent of young children, is resisting and risking death morally defensible or should the welfare of the child come before any political activism? Is going to fight in a war as a parent comparable?
8. Should Ethel have confessed to something she did not do with the hope that she would be freed and be a mother for her children? Or was her position impossible? Was she correct in believing that if she confessed to knowing that Julius had undertaken spying, her sons would have seen her as someone who sent their father to his death?
9. What do you think of the way the press behaved? Or the way the judiciary behaved? What difference did any of this make?
10. Why did Ethel constantly plead the Fifth Amendment at her trial? Was this a mistake or was she correct to believe she was facing a trial to ascertain if she was a communist?



11. What do you think of the way President Eisenhower responded to clemency pleas and to what extent was he motivated by politics and fear of losing the next election? It is not clear if the president knew the details of Venona, but, now that the public knows about Venona, do you believe the end justified the means? Was President Truman weaker than Eisenhower (he had the problem for longer) and that Eisenhower, as a war hero, could have taken the difficult decision to give Ethel a custodial sentence instead of electrocution?
12. How do you see Ethel's mother, Tessie? As a mother of four children, was she correct in trying to press Ethel to confess, even if that meant telling a lie? Can you understand why during the Depression she did not encourage Ethel to go to college? Or do you think, since she never attended any of Ethel's performances, she was motivated by jealousy?
13. At what point in the story, if any, is misogyny detectable or do you believe the atmosphere of the 1950s was simply a reflection of an era when most women were homemakers?
14. Can you make a case for Ethel being a good mother?
15. At what point in the story do you believe anti-Semitism played a role?
16. Do you believe that Ethel's brother David was simply doing the best he could to save his own life and that of his wife so that their children had a mother looking after them? How might he have behaved differently?
17. What do you think of Julius and why do you think Ethel loved him so intensely? Was he foolish or naive or motivated by a desire to help an ally and if the latter, is that in any way acceptable?
18. Why do you believe the story of Ethel being the master and Julius her slave took hold?
19. How do you explain that two boys with a disrupted childhood, who learned how their parents were vilified, were rejected by one set of grandparents and had to visit their parents in prison prior to a barbaric killing, nonetheless grew up as responsible adults?
20. What lessons can be learned from this story? What does the Rosenberg story tell us about the reality of the Cold War?
21. How is the story of Ethel Rosenberg resonant today? Or do you believe historical events should remain in the specific contexts of when they happened?