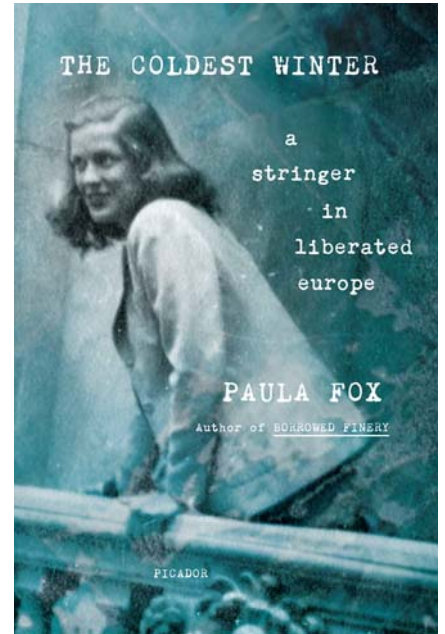


READING GROUP GUIDE

The Coldest Winter *A Stringer in Liberated Europe*

by Paula Fox



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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Coldest Winter* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Coldest Winter*.

About the Book

A moving companion to *Borrowed Finery*, Paula Fox's previous memoir, *The Coldest Winter* unfolds in the ravaged terrain of Europe shortly after World War II. Paula Fox was just twenty-two years old when she bade farewell to New York and began exploring the ruins of London, Warsaw, Paris, Prague, Madrid, and other cities after taking a reporting job for a small British news service. Living off meager wages in decrepit, poorly heated rooms, she experienced firsthand the realities faced by most of Europe as it struggled to rebuild. From an empty Louvre and ruined cathedrals to Communist election takeovers, she recalls a time and place that marked a significant turning point in the world's memory, and in her illustrious career as a writer.

Praise for the Book

“An intensely felt memoir of a young woman wading through the bright shards of 1946 Europe . . . Both deeply personal and historically relevant, *The Coldest Winter* is a marvel of concision and intensity.”

—*O, The Oprah Magazine*

“In this lovely wisp of a book . . . Fox zeroes in on a limited number of evocative details and anecdotes . . . [and] offers madeleines that stir memories in us that aren’t even ours.”

—*The New York Times Book Review*

“Lean, exquisitely written.”

—*Entertainment Weekly*

“One of the many virtues of this uncommonly fine book is that it brings [post-World War II Europe] almost palpably back to life, yet without an ounce of sensationalism or sentimentality. . . . Beautifully written but never showily so.”

—*The Washington Post*

“As always, Fox writes with spare lyricism and emotional force, spinning a fever dream so powerful that her experiences feel as though they’re our own.”

—*Vogue*

“In thoughts as stunning as camera flashes, Fox knits her past together. She presents startling images and unforgettable stories. . . . Chekhov’s stories come to mind, with their ethical dilemmas, their human ugliness and pathos, their unquestionable beauty and compassion. *The Coldest Winter* recalls a year or so in Fox’s life, but even more it asks why her experience, or anyone’s, matters.”

—*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

About the Author

Paula Fox is the author of a previous memoir, *Borrowed Finery*, which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award and won the PEN/Martha Albrand Award, as well as six novels, including *Desperate Characters*, *The Widow’s Children*, and *Poor George*. She is also a Newbery Award-winning children’s book author. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Discussion Questions

1. In the book’s second paragraph, Paula Fox writes, “I imagined that if I could only find the right place, the difficulties of life would vanish.” Is the wish to “escape oneself” through travel a universal experience? If you were to embark on a similar journey today, with a budget as limited as Fox’s, where would you go?

2. Discuss the scenes captured in the opening chapter. Did Fox's life in New York during the 1940s prepare her for the coming trip to Europe? What do her memories of music, especially that of Paul Robeson, indicate about the cultural climate she was about to leave behind?
3. How would you characterize her initiation in London? What did she learn about politics, strangers' homes, and the mundane lives of famous people?
4. In what way were her travels and memories influenced by her role as a journalist? Were they influenced by her role as a future novelist? Would her travels have been less enlightening if had she worked for a larger news agency, such as Reuters, rather than receiving casual assignments at venues such as the Cheshire Cheese?
5. How did the author's experience in Paris compare to her time in Warsaw? What differences did you detect in the degrees of destruction for both populations, both in physical and emotional terms?
6. What did Mrs. Grassner teach Fox about the Holocaust? What perspective did she provide that could not have been presented by any tour guides or history books?
7. In what way does the violent newsboy embody the results of war-ravaged communities in general? What is expressed in the combination of his injuries and his approach to survival? Is Marie his opposite, or another version of him?
8. How did you react to the chapter titled "Children of the Tatras"? Did the situation captured in it mirror the book's last chapter, which describes the children of Sleepy Hollow? Should we make distinctions among the reasons for a child's abandonment? How might Fox's own childhood, poignantly conveyed in *Borrowed Finery*, have affected her experiences with the children in this book?
9. In "Perlita," Fox is in the company of relatives. At what point in this visit does she begin to personalize the oppression and war that had recently blazed through Europe? Is she surprised to find a sense of home and self on this part of the trip?
10. How does the voyage home compare to the voyage to Europe in Fox's recollection? How have her impressions of the U.S., and New York in particular, changed?
11. Have society, technology, and economics transformed Europe entirely for the better since the period depicted in *The Coldest Winter*? Though rebuilding and political stability have erased much of what she saw, what would remain if you were to retrace her steps in the twenty-first century? Would an average twenty-two-year-old American today be as resourceful as she was if embarking on a similar sojourn?
12. Fox describes the enchantment of Europe, even under grim circumstances (such as her husband's anecdote about landing at Omaha Beach in the wake of D-Day but nonetheless feeling exhilarated to be in Europe). What accounts for the appeal of this locale? Does its aura measure up to its reality?

13. What is the effect of the numerous photographs included in *The Coldest Winter*? Do they enhance the sense of surrealism Fox mentions about those days, or do they add contrast to her words?
14. In the book's the last scene, Fox describes the telescope as a means for showing the boys "something other than themselves." What are the healing qualities of this experience? Is this experience—the concept of being exposed to a world removed from our own—a rite of passage in our culture? Should it be?
15. In what way did *The Coldest Winter* enrich your reading of *Borrowed Finery*? What lifelong themes and quests (especially about identity and sustenance) were encapsulated in her days as a stringer?
16. The book's subtitle is "A Stringer in Liberated Europe." In what sense is the word "liberated" ironic in this context? How do Fox's recollections of this time period compare to your memories of it, or to the family stories you have heard?

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