

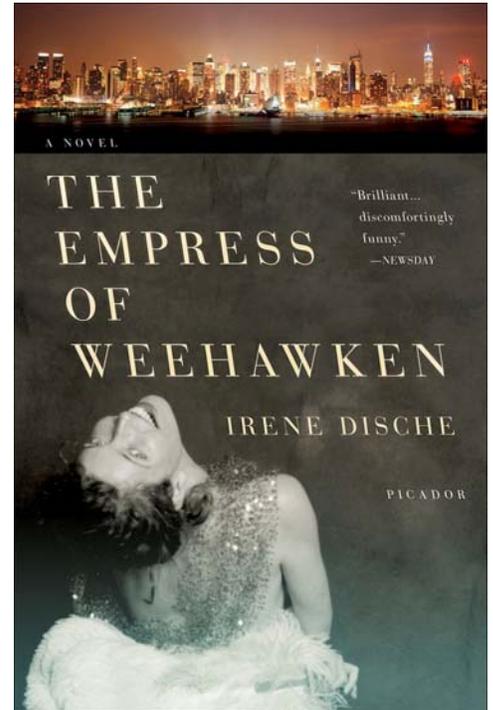
READING GROUP GUIDE

Empress of Weehawken

A Novel

by Irene Dische

ISBN-13: 978-0-312-42795-5
ISBN-10: 0-312-42795-6



About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Empress of Weehawken* 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 Empress of Weehawken*.

About the Book

Recalling three quirky, resilient, and endlessly adventurous generations of her family, Elisabeth Rother is a narrator you'll not soon forget. In candid scenes, never scrimping on juicy details and Old World advice, she takes us from her aristocratic days of prosperity, before she and her husband fled Nazi Germany, to her transformation into a fervently patriotic American, and the decades of wavering fortunes, exasperating motherhood, and staunch marriage that defined the rest of her life.

A devout Catholic whose husband, Carl, converted from Judaism, Elisabeth is deeply vexed by the questionable choices of those around her: her daughter, Renate, sleeps on sheets that haven't

been ironed, performs autopsies for a living, and marries a health nut; her defiant granddaughter, Irene, drops out of school only to run away on a series of international hijinks, and she doesn't understand that family jewelry is to be sold in times of starvation. Not even Carl is beyond reproach, developing an unhealthy attachment to the widow next door in a futile attempt to help her get over a drinking problem.

Through it all, Elisabeth never fails to find evidence of redemption—and copious self-improvement lessons for those she loves the most.

Praise for *The Empress of Weehawken*

“Every page is a delight...[in] this brutally funny debut...Dische evokes human failings so skillfully that readers will catch themselves laughing at mankind at its cruelest and darkest.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Dische manages to blend the comic and the poignant in a style that captivates and delights . . . Highly recommended.” —*Library Journal* (starred review)

“Enthralling.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

"I would tell you *The Empress of Weehawken* is my favorite book, but you'd think I was exaggerating. So let's just leave it at: it's perfect." —Patricia Marx, author of *Him Her Him Again* and *The End of Him*

About the Author

Irene Dische's work has appeared in numerous magazines, including *The New Yorker*, and her books, published in twenty-two countries, have included international bestsellers. She divides her time between Berlin and Rhinebeck, New York.

Discussion Questions

1. How were you affected by the fact that the author and Elisabeth's granddaughter have the same name? How is the experience of reading a novel different from reading a memoir?
2. What are the merits of Elisabeth's criteria for choosing a spouse? What was the key to her enduring marriage to Carl?
3. Did Carl's family have anything other than nationality in common with Elisabeth's? Why was Carl unenthusiastic about his relatives and their Jewish cultural identity?
4. What ultimately led to the Rothers' survival under Hitler? How did their situation differ from those in other Holocaust narratives you have read? How would you have resolved Elisabeth and Carl's dilemma over whether to flee?
5. How would you describe Elisabeth's unique storytelling voice? How does she manage to be both irresistible and outrageous? Who is the “keeper of the saga” in your family?
6. What are the traits of Elisabeth's version of Catholicism? How does the hierarchy of sins help her negotiate life? What does she fear? How does she determine whether others are worthy?

7. Discuss the parenting styles described in *The Empress of Weehawken*. How did Liesel and her niece exert control over the children in their care (and over the parents)? How does Elisabeth's mothering compare to Renate's? Was it nature or nurture that caused Irene and Little Carl to make unconventional, sometimes self-defeating, choices?
8. Has the idea of an American identity changed very much since the time Elisabeth and Renate finally reunited with Carl? What aspects of American life characterized the mid-twentieth century but have now vanished? What did the Rothers love and dislike about their American and German homelands?
9. Discuss the various husbands described in *The Empress of Weehawken*. Who did you see as the ideal men? What did Renate seem to need in a man? How do her husbands compare to her father?
10. The novel opens with Carl's determination to have a son and closes with the line "nothing beats a daughter." How do the novel's female characters learn how to define themselves as women? What were the expectations for each generation in areas such as sex, marriage, careers, grooming, and housekeeping? How do their attitudes compare to the ones in your family history?
11. How do Elisabeth and Renate approach the cycles of life? Was Elisabeth ever rebellious in her youth? How do their attitudes change when they become widows?
12. Elisabeth often tells moments when "the bill came," and God delivered retribution. How does this point of view shape her decisions? Does Irene prove or disprove Elisabeth's ideas about the rewards systems lurking in our destinies?
13. How do the novel's characters feel about money? What does stinginess or extravagance indicate about their personalities? Who are the novel's most prosperous characters, in literal or symbolic ways?
14. To what do you attribute Elisabeth's longevity? What legacy has she left when she narrates her final, joyful scene?

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