

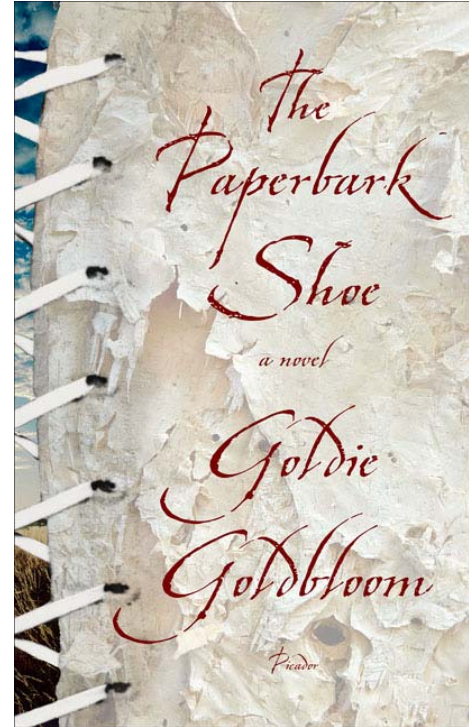
READING GROUP GUIDE

The Paperbark Shoe

A Novel

by Goldie Goldbloom

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Paperbark Shoe* 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 Paperbark Shoe*. Discussion questions have been reprinted courtesy of Fremantle Press.

About the Book

From 1941 to 1947, eighteen thousand Italian prisoners of war were sent to Australia. The Italian surrender that followed the downfall of Mussolini had created a novel circumstance: prisoners who theoretically were no longer enemies. Many of these exiles were sent to work on isolated farms, unguarded.

The Paperbark Shoe is the unforgettable story of Gin Boyle—an albino, a classically trained pianist, and a woman with a painful past. Disavowed by her wealthy stepfather, her unlikely

savior is the farmer Mr. Toad—a little man with a taste for women's corsets. Together with their two children, they weather the hardship of rural life and the mockery of their neighbors. But with the arrival of two Italian prisoners of war, their lives are turned upside down. Thousands of miles from home, Antonio and John find themselves on Mr. and Mrs. Toad's farm, exiles in the company of exiles. *The Paperbark Shoe* is a remarkable novel about the far-reaching repercussions of war, the subtle violence of displacement, and what it means to live as a captive—in enemy country, and in one's own skin.

About the Author

GOLDIE GOLDBLOOM's fiction has appeared in *StoryQuarterly*, *Narrative*, and *Prairie Schooner*. Her stories have been translated into more than ten languages. She lives in Chicago with her eight children.

Discussion Questions

1. Virginia Toad is an unreliable narrator. In what ways does she reveal this unreliability to us – via accounts of her mental state, her relationship with Antonio, and her relationship with her children?
2. What is the effect of reading a book where a gap remains between what the narrator tells us and what the reader understands to be happening?
3. Many of Gin's qualities are less than likeable. For instance, what kind of mother is she? What difference might it have made to Gin if Joan, her first (and only albino) child, had lived? In what way does the author manage to retain reader sympathy for her narrator?
4. In what ways is Toad a fitting partner for Gin? Is it surprising they have found each other? What are the redemptive aspects of his nature? What, ultimately, does the reader feel for him?
5. What different kinds of forbidden love appear in this novel? What do they tell us about the needs of human beings? What do they reveal about bigotry and censure? Which is worse: to love that which is forbidden, or never to love at all?
6. How does Antonio invade the defences of Virginia Toad? Is his love a true love? What do you make of his nickname for Gin? How in the end are we to judge him?
7. What does Gin's love for Antonio bring her? What does she lose through loving him?
8. Consider the final sequence (pages 265–280). Does Gin actually visit Italy? Does it matter if this final section 'really' takes place or not? What is the importance of the very final scene in which Gin takes the broken ring in her hand?
9. What does Gin learn in the passage of this final section of the book? Why is it set apart

from the rest of the book?

10. Would this book have been diminished without the final section? And what does the 'prologue' on page 9 add to Gin's tale?

11. In what ways is this a story that is bound by historical events? In what ways might it speak for all time?

12. Do you agree that 'in war, there are no unwounded soldiers'?

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