

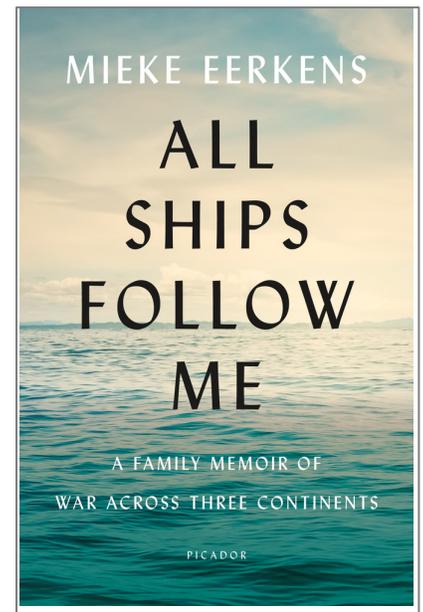
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# Discussion Guide

## *All Ships Follow Me*

by Mieke Eerkens

**An engrossing, epic saga of one family's experiences on both sides of WWII, *All Ships Follow Me* questions our common narrative of the conflict and our stark notions of victim and perpetrator, while tracing the lasting effects of war through several generations.**



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### ABOUT THE BOOK

In March 1942, Mieke Eerkens' father was a ten-year-old boy living in the Dutch East Indies. When the Japanese invaded the island he, his family, and one hundred thousand other Dutch civilians were interned in a concentration camp and forced into hard labor for three years. After the Japanese surrendered, Mieke's father and his family were set free in a country that plunged immediately into civil war.

Across the globe in the Netherlands, police carried a crying five-year-old girl out of her home at war's end, abandoned and ostracized as a daughter of Nazi sympathizers. This was Mieke's mother. She would be left on the street in front of her sealed home as her parents were taken away and imprisoned in the same camps where the country's Jews had recently been held. Many years later, Mieke's parents met, got married, and moved to California, where she and her siblings were born. While her parents lived far from the events of their past, the effects of the war would continue to be felt in their daily lives and in the lives of their children.

*All Ships Follow Me* moves from Indonesia to the Netherlands to the United States, and spans generations, as Mieke recounts her parents' lives during and just after the war, and travels with them in the present day to the sites of their childhood in an attempt to understand their experiences and how it formed them. *All Ships Follow Me* is a deeply personal, sweeping saga of the wounds of war, and the way trauma can be passed down through generations.

## QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. At a young age, Sjeffie's friend Peter dies of "a broken heart" in the Japanese prison camp. Upon reflecting on the event, Mieke extrapolates, "Feel too much, and you could die." She notes, "My father observes all of this, the tangible consequences of weakness, and he carries the knowledge with him for the rest of his life." In what ways does this knowledge of "the tangible consequences of weakness" reverberate through Sjeffie's life? How does this perspective affect the other members of his family?
2. Does it surprise you that most of the Dutch POWs remained in the prison camps after the Japanese surrendered? How do you think you may have reacted in that situation?
3. Mieke cites a campaign slogan she finds on an NSB political poster: "The woman who thinks also votes NSB." In what other ways did the NSB utilize propaganda to indoctrinate Dutch party members? How was Mieke's maternal grandfather swayed by propaganda?
4. In what ways do Elsje's and Sjeff's perspectives on their pasts evolve by traveling back to the Netherlands and Indonesia?
5. Before reading Grandfather de Kock's letters, Mieke adopted a very harsh view of him because, she says, "I need a villain. I need him to be a caricature to reconcile this secret fact I know about him with the narrative I have received in school, in popular culture, about what Nazi sympathizers look like." Though she feels this way initially, much of the memoir interrogates and explodes the binary concept of villain and victim, especially in times of war. In what ways do you see Mieke grapple with this tension between the "need for a victim" to make sense of a family experience and a more nuanced portrait of war and humanity?
6. Hunger is a persistent struggle in both Sjeffie's and Elsje's childhoods, a brutal byproduct of war. In what ways do their experiences with hunger influence them later in life? How does it impact the next generation?
7. Though a member of the NSB, Grandfather de Kock refused to use his affiliation to garner status or food for his family during the war. In what ways does this shade your opinions of him?
8. What parallels do you see in the aftermath of the war in the Netherlands and in Indonesia?
9. After driving to Dordrecht to look for Ket and Jan's former home, Mieke is left despondent when she finds the house transformed, stating, "I will never be able to know my mother's experience, and will only be able to fill in images based on my research, just as a reader will only be able to create their own vision of the truth based on the information I present. The true narrative is buried somewhere beneath Dordrecht's rebar and concrete. How do you interpret the phrase, "true narrative?" Do you think it's possible to construct a "true narrative?" Why or why not?
10. What do you think about the indictment of Elsje's mother after the war? Do you view her as complicit with the NSB or wrongly convicted? Somewhere in between? Why?
11. When Sjeff—now Jeff—obtains a job with Aerospace Corporation, he must give up his Dutch citizenship and naturalize in America in order to obtain a security clearance. Mieke notes that "he does so immediately and un sentimentally . . . He lost his home long before this anyway, and considers himself a Nomad." Yet, when it comes to finding a wife, "he wants to meet a Dutch woman." What do you make of these two sentiments? How might one complicate the other?

10. In what ways do Mieke and her siblings inherit their parents' trauma?

11. Mieke describes herself as “tribeless,” and “like an outsider in two cultures.” This feeling, in turn, made her cling to her family home, and once it is sold, she feels “perpetually homeless.” How does Mieke’s relationship to “home” differ from her parents’? In what ways do her feelings stem from their experiences?

12. In exploring why she writes, Mieke notes that she feels “some sense of duty to tell the narratives of people who are so close to their trauma or shame that they aren’t able to articulate it themselves . . . My writing is a form of reparation, for myself and for them.” Explore the concept of reparation. How would you define it? In what ways do you think this memoir fulfills a sense of reparation for Mieke and her family?

13. Unpack the following: “We think that acknowledged victims are the most damaged and suffer the most, but when I look at my parents, I see the opposite. I see the power my father derived from surviving abuse, and the weakness my mother learned from her family’s perpetrator status.” How do you see this concept play out in the narrative? Cite a few examples.

14. Toward the end of the book, Mieke states: “Refusing to see the vulnerabilities and human flaws of perpetrators—at least at the level of those who don’t directly carry out torture or murder—refusing to see them as human beings rather than cartoon villains, begs for a repeat of war.” How might you apply this statement to current situations in the world? To your own judgments and biases?

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**MIEKE EERKENS**'s writing has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, and *Guernica*, among others. She earned an M.A. in English from Leiden University in the Netherlands, and an M.F.A. from the University of Iowa. Eerkens teaches creative writing online for UCLA Extension’s Writers’ Program and as a visiting instructor for the Iowa Summer Writing Program. She divides her time between Amsterdam and California. *All Ships Follow Me* is her first book.



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