

"A richly textured, gorgeously written debut that I couldn't put down."

—*Joanna Quinn*, *New York Times* bestselling author
of *The Whalebone Theatre*



VENUS, VANISHING

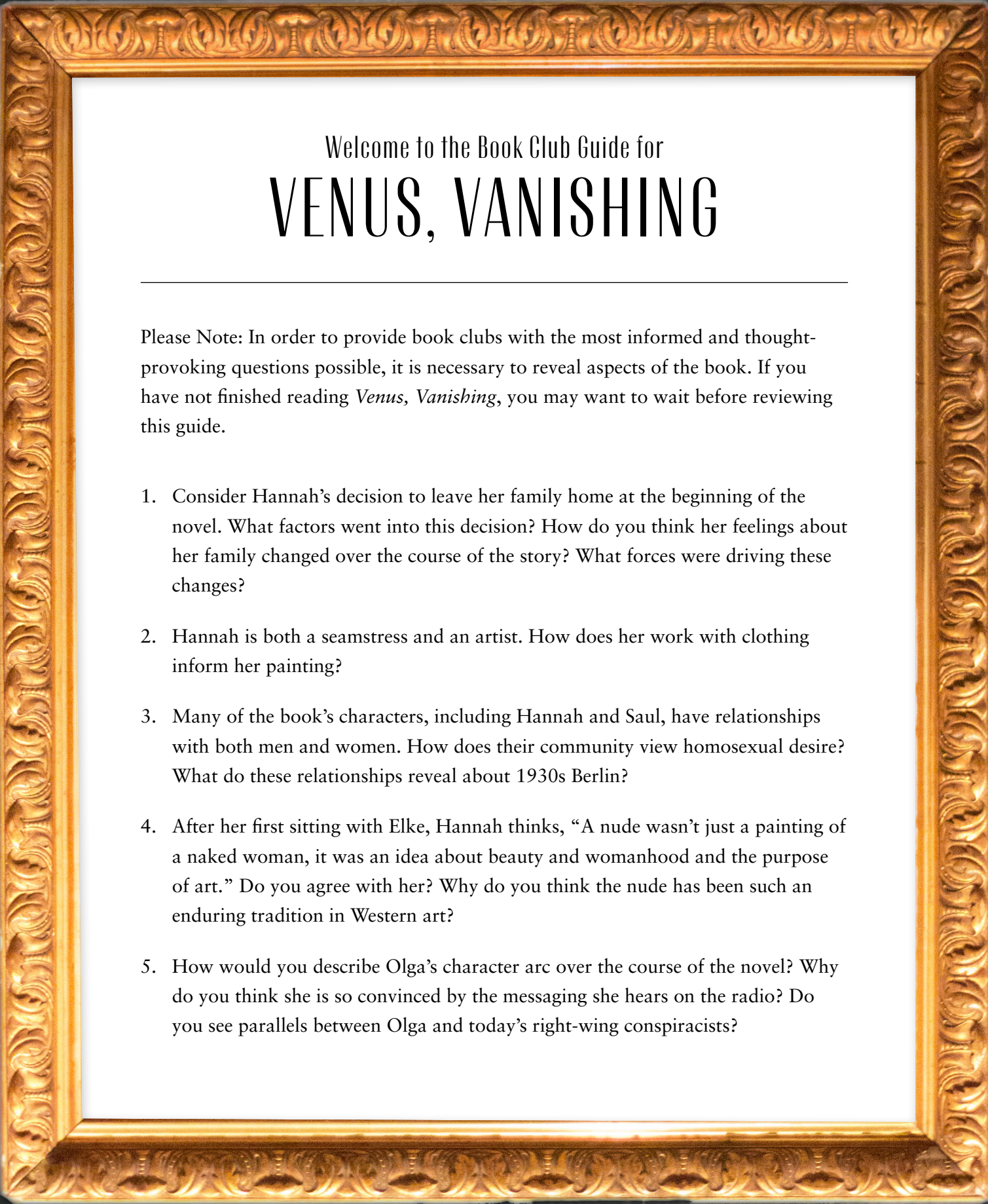
A Novel

**BOOK
CLUB
GUIDE**

Rebecca Birrell

"Vivid . . . Asking what it means to make art in an emergency."

—*Eleanor Catton*, author of *The Luminaries*

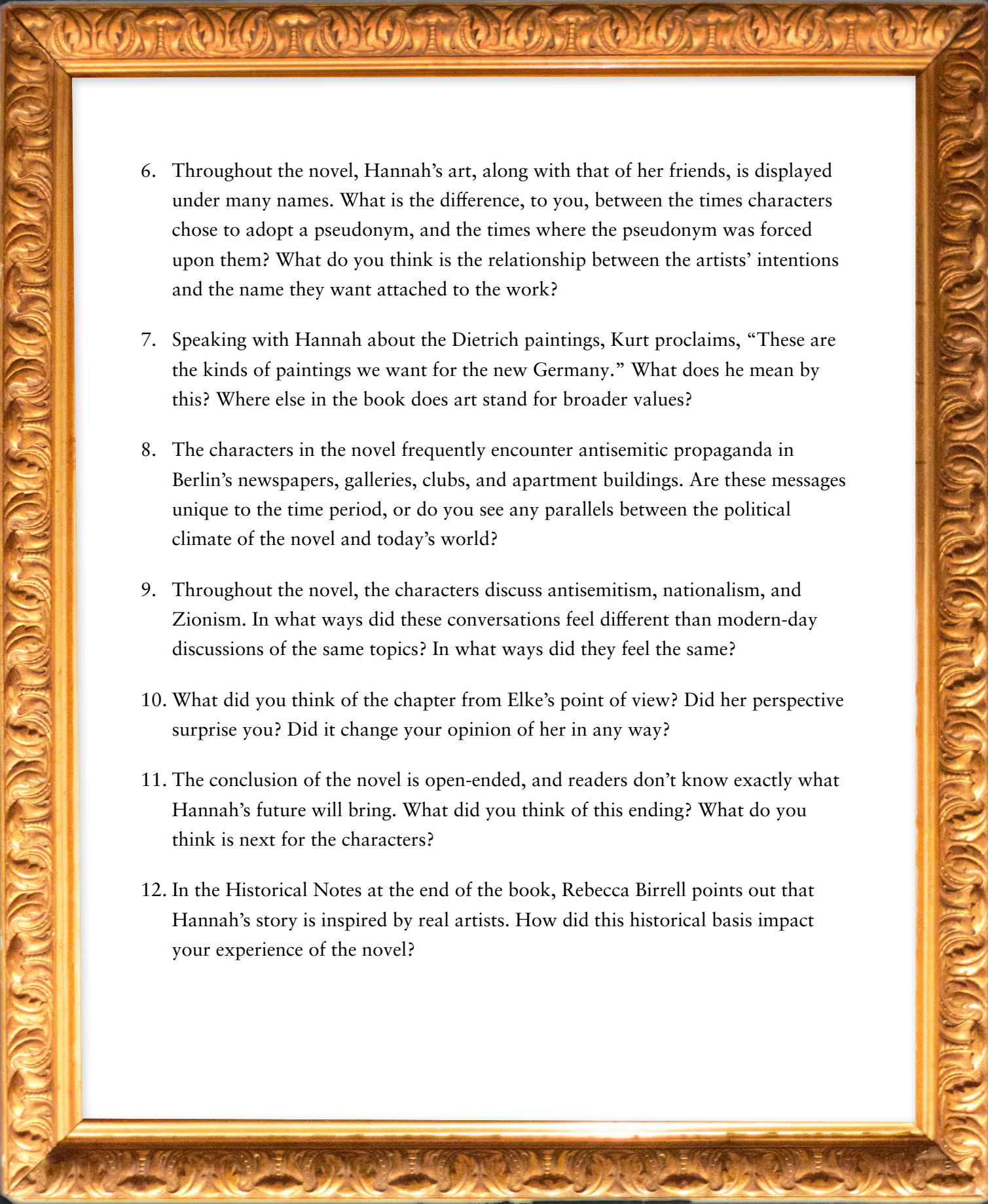


Welcome to the Book Club Guide for

VENUS, VANISHING

Please Note: In order to provide book clubs with the most informed and thought-provoking questions possible, it is necessary to reveal aspects of the book. If you have not finished reading *Venus, Vanishing*, you may want to wait before reviewing this guide.

1. Consider Hannah's decision to leave her family home at the beginning of the novel. What factors went into this decision? How do you think her feelings about her family changed over the course of the story? What forces were driving these changes?
2. Hannah is both a seamstress and an artist. How does her work with clothing inform her painting?
3. Many of the book's characters, including Hannah and Saul, have relationships with both men and women. How does their community view homosexual desire? What do these relationships reveal about 1930s Berlin?
4. After her first sitting with Elke, Hannah thinks, "A nude wasn't just a painting of a naked woman, it was an idea about beauty and womanhood and the purpose of art." Do you agree with her? Why do you think the nude has been such an enduring tradition in Western art?
5. How would you describe Olga's character arc over the course of the novel? Why do you think she is so convinced by the messaging she hears on the radio? Do you see parallels between Olga and today's right-wing conspiracists?

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6. Throughout the novel, Hannah's art, along with that of her friends, is displayed under many names. What is the difference, to you, between the times characters chose to adopt a pseudonym, and the times where the pseudonym was forced upon them? What do you think is the relationship between the artists' intentions and the name they want attached to the work?
 7. Speaking with Hannah about the Dietrich paintings, Kurt proclaims, "These are the kinds of paintings we want for the new Germany." What does he mean by this? Where else in the book does art stand for broader values?
 8. The characters in the novel frequently encounter antisemitic propaganda in Berlin's newspapers, galleries, clubs, and apartment buildings. Are these messages unique to the time period, or do you see any parallels between the political climate of the novel and today's world?
 9. Throughout the novel, the characters discuss antisemitism, nationalism, and Zionism. In what ways did these conversations feel different than modern-day discussions of the same topics? In what ways did they feel the same?
 10. What did you think of the chapter from Elke's point of view? Did her perspective surprise you? Did it change your opinion of her in any way?
 11. The conclusion of the novel is open-ended, and readers don't know exactly what Hannah's future will bring. What did you think of this ending? What do you think is next for the characters?
 12. In the Historical Notes at the end of the book, Rebecca Birrell points out that Hannah's story is inspired by real artists. How did this historical basis impact your experience of the novel?