

The Trick

By Emanuel Bergmann

Reading Group Guide

*This reading group guide for **The Trick** includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

Introduction

When the son of a rabbi walks into the tent of a traveling circus, his life is changed forever. Mesmerized by the Half-Moon Man and his beautiful assistant, he decides to leave home and train as a magician, eventually rising to fame under the stage name the Great Zabbatini. As Europe descends into World War II, Zabbatini is discovered to be a Jew, and his battered trunk full of magic tricks becomes his only hope for survival.

Seventy years later in Los Angeles, ten-year-old Max finds a scratched-up LP that captured Zabbatini performing his greatest illusions. But the track in which Zabbatini performs the spell of eternal love—which Max believes will keep his parents from getting divorced—is damaged beyond repair. Desperate for a solution, Max seeks out the Great Zabbatini. What he finds instead is an elderly cynical magician in need of redemption who no longer believes in anything.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. From the beginning of *The Trick*, Moshe Goldenhirsch's story is woven like a fairy tale—a stark contrast to his reality when Max finds him at the King David Home for the Elderly in Los Angeles. How did this affect your perception of the magician? How did meeting Moshe Goldenhirsch affect Max's belief in the Great Zabbatini?
2. How does Dr. Ginsky's reaction to Rifka reflect the sociopolitical environment of that time period? How did his demeanor change when she mentioned that her husband was Laibl Goldenhirsch? Consider how this scenario might have played out today. How would you have reacted?
3. At the core of *The Trick* are themes of fathers and sons, identity, and coming of age. How did Rifka's secret affect Moshe's relationship with Laibl, the Locksmith, and the Half-Moon Man? Compare this to Harry and Max's relationship. How did Moshe and Max's relationship affect each of them?
4. On page 53, "Max realized for the first time that people had wounds you couldn't see." What are the invisible wounds each of the characters carry with them? (Moshe's parents, Max's parents, the Great Zabbatini, Max's grandmother, etc.) How does it affect their beliefs, the way they see the world, and how they interact with one another?
5. On page 77, Deborah shouts at her son: "I should have had that abortion—then I wouldn't have to deal with any of this!" What do you think of Max's reaction to his mother's outburst? How would you have reacted in that moment?
6. How is grief handled in *The Trick*? How do the characters mourn when Rifka passes away, when Max's grandmother survives the death camp, and when Max's parents announce they're getting divorced? How does this parallel the invisible wounds they carry and impact their ability to move on?
7. Moshe has an emotional reaction to seeing the Statue of Liberty when he first arrives in the United States. The Statue of Liberty has become a powerful symbol for incoming humanitarian refugees. How was seeing the Statue of Liberty upon arrival different for refugees than the airports that receive them now? What happens when those ports aren't as welcoming as they had hoped?
8. Compare the challenges that young Moshe struggled with in Europe versus the problems Max faces in Los Angeles. Can they be compared? Despite the difference in gravity, do they weigh equally on each boy?
9. Disappearing is a common theme in *The Trick*, whether literally or metaphorically. Discuss its effect in each instance.
10. Max believes with his whole heart that the Great Zabbatini's eternal love spell will keep his parents together, but the magical whimsy of a child can only go so far. What would have actually saved their marriage? What caused Deborah and Harry's relationship to fall apart?

11. Piles of suitcases are often shown in pictures of the Holocaust as symbols of death. How, in *The Trick*, do they represent life?

12. For Max's grandmother, it's important to share her past and the story of how she survived the Holocaust. Have you heard similar stories from your grandparents? Do you think it's important to preserve our family history and continue to pass it down from generation to generation?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. *The Trick* recalls the melancholy humor of Isaac Bashevis Singer's stories and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, and the heartbreaking pathos of the film *Life is Beautiful*. Read those titles and watch the film with your book club for comparison. What are the similar themes that occur? Compare and contrast how each work approaches them.

2. The Great Zabbatini's actions during the war create a ripple effect that trickles down to Max Cohn's very existence. Do you know of any such event in your family history? Follow up on the lives of refugees and survivors that have been mentioned in the news. How have their lives been impacted by an act of kindness of this magnitude? How many more weren't as lucky?

3. To learn more about Emanuel Bergmann, read reviews of *The Trick*, find him on tour, and become a fan of his Simon & Schuster author page at <http://www.simonandschuster.com/authors/Emanuel-Bergmann/2115017483>.