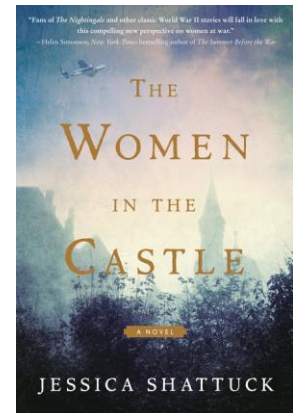


## THE WOMEN IN THE CASTLE

William Morrow

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ISBN: 9780062563668



### Introduction

Three women, haunted by the past and the secrets they hold...

Set at the end of World War II, in a crumbling Bavarian castle that once played host to all of German high society, a powerful and propulsive story of three widows whose lives and fates become intertwined—an affecting, shocking, and ultimately redemptive novel from the author of the *New York Times* Notable Book *The Hazards of Good Breeding*.

Amid the ashes of Nazi Germany's defeat, Marianne von Lingenfels returns to the once-grand castle of her husband's ancestors, an imposing stone fortress now fallen into ruin following years of war. The widow of a resister murdered in the failed July 20, 1944, plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, Marianne plans to uphold the promise she made to her husband's brave conspirators: to find and protect their wives, her fellow resistance widows.

First Marianne rescues six-year-old Martin, the son of her dearest childhood friend, from a Nazi reeducation home. Together, they make their way across the smoldering wreckage of their homeland to Berlin, where Martin's mother, the beautiful and naive Benita, has fallen into the hands of occupying Red Army soldiers. Then she locates Ania, another resister's wife, and her two boys, now refugees languishing in one of the many camps that house the millions displaced by the war.

As Marianne assembles this makeshift family from the ruins of her husband's resistance movement, she is certain their shared pain and circumstances will hold them together. But she quickly discovers that the black-and-white, highly principled world of her privileged past has become infinitely more complicated, filled with secrets and dark passions that threaten to tear them apart. Eventually, all three women must come to terms with the choices that have defined their lives before, during, and after the war—each with their own unique share of challenges.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Compare and contrast the three women of the novel: Marianne, Benita, and Ania. How did their backgrounds—class, family, education—define each of them and affect their outlook toward the Nazis and one another? Did Marianne's privilege make it easier for her to be an active resister? Why was Benita dazzled by the Nazi's pageantry? How did Ania's childhood influence her feelings toward Hitler?

2. Would the three women have been friends if not for the war? How do the events of the war and its aftermath shape each of them and their perceptions of themselves? Though they have numerous differences, what characteristics do they share? While the war brought these women into each other's lives, was it ultimately what bound them together?
  3. Before the war began, Marianne was charged with being "the Commander of Wives and Children." How does she uphold her duty? A passionate and deeply moral woman, Marianne was certain she always did the right thing. But did she?
  4. Do you think the confidence and self-certainty that enabled Marianne to survive also blinded her to her own failings—and to the goodness in those who did not seem to measure up to her rigid standards? Was she a good protector and friend to Benita and Ania?
  5. What drew Benita to Connie? Did she love him? What were her true feelings for Herr Muller? Why was Marianne so opposed to their union? Should Herr Muller have defied Marianne and married Benita?
  6. How did Benita's beauty both help and hurt her? How did reading Connie's final letter influence the tragic choice she makes? Why did Benita feel that love, for her generation, was dead?
  7. Think about Ania. Do you think she was like most ordinary Germans of the period? How did she hide her past from Marianne and Benita? How did the revelation about her past affect her relationship with Marianne? Do you think Ania was ashamed of the choices she made?
  8. At the end of the war, each woman was in a different place, physically and emotionally. What ordeals did these widows face? What choices were they forced to make to survive? How did the years of fighting—and their nation's defeat—change daily life for Germans like Marianne, Benita, Ania, and their children?
  9. Where did fate eventually lead these three women? What about their children? How did the secrets these women carried haunt their lives?
  10. *The Women in the Castle* offers a different look at World War II as it explores the lives of ordinary Germans. How does Jessica Shattuck's novel challenge our perceptions and notions of Germans during and after the war? Were women like Marianne, Benita, and Ania victims in their own way? How responsible are individuals for their leaders? What about resisters like Marianne and her circle? Why do you think she saw the true monster that Hitler was when many others did not?
  11. What insights does *The Women in the Castle* hold for our own time?
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