

Reading Group Guide

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *Mr. Mac and Me*.

About the book:

Mr. Mac and Me is set in an idyllic village in the English countryside, where the tragedies of World War I and the rapid changes of industrialization take place in the most intimate ways. It's a place removed from the politics of war, a place that feels no benefits from the booming economy of machinery and scrap metal. Through the eyes of a young boy, Thomas Maggs, we see the subtle ways the daily lives of the townspeople change, and we see the ideological concerns and propaganda of the war take hold in their collective psyche. And in contrast, we see an artist, Charles Rennie Mackintosh—Mr. Mac—a man who, like Thomas, has a keen eye for the beauty of nature, who could spend all his days sequestered with his wife and his paints, pushing the boundaries of his art. As the world around him hardens and mourns, Mr. Mac persists in his paintings, becoming ever more drawn to the wildflowers, the grasses, the pieces of the village that persist in growing and blooming despite the darkness that seems to have descended on the place. He isolates himself from the rumblings of the war in his art and Thomas floats somewhere between, trying to find his place in a world he's only barely seen.

For discussion:

- 1) Thomas Maggs has dreamed of going to sea his whole life, but his family is staunchly opposed. What appeal does the ocean hold for him? Why is his desire so troubling to his parents?
- 2) Thomas is initially drawn to Mr. Mac because of their mutual handicap. Does this ultimately tie them together in any way? How do they each respond to their legs? Is there a difference between the two?
- 3) Thomas spends a great deal of time exploring the area around his town and is accustomed to being able to travel about undetected because he knows the land so well. And yet Mr. Mac is always aware of his presence. What about Mr. Mac makes him aware of Thomas in a way that those who have been around him his whole life are not?
- 4) Once the war begins, the village begins to adhere to the Defence of the Realm Act. How does this change their day-to-day life? How does it change the way they relate to other people, both their fellow townspeople and outsiders like Mr. Mac?
- 5) After DORA is announced, Thomas spends a fair amount of time worrying that he'll accidentally commit treason, and keeping watch for signs of treason in others. What do you think his understanding of those words is? Where did he come by them? What purpose does that serve?
- 6) How does the village's relationship to battle and to their soldiers change over the course of the book? What events cause those changes? Where do you see the action of the war encroaching on the relative peace of the home front?

- 7) Thomas is very critical of his own drawings after seeing Margaret's and Mr. Mac's work. What does he feel his work is lacking? Are his motivations to draw different from theirs? Does it seem that those differences affect the quality of their art?
- 8) World War I began in the midst of a world changing due to industrialization. Where do we see signs of this in *Mr. Mac and Me*? What are the different scales on which the shift from human labor to machinery is apparent?
- 9) Many of the characters in *Mr. Mac and Me* are concerned about money. Who are they and why do finances concern them? What are the different ways they each try to provide for themselves and those around them? How has the war affected their ability to make a living?
- 10) Ann reads Mr. Mac's letters to Margaret because she likes the way he uses words to express his love. Where else do we see love in *Mr. Mac and Me*? Which relationships seem defined by real love and which by some other tie?
- 11) Thomas often compares himself to his deceased brothers. How does his awareness of them and what they mean to his parents affect his confidence and understanding of his own place in his family? How does that change over the course of the book?
- 12) When Thomas sees Mr. Mac crying in church he wonders why, noting it might be "some private Scottish grief of his own" (69). How do the characters in the book deal with grief? How do they differ from one another?
- 13) Of his work, Margaret once says to Mr. Mac, "Nature is there in everything you've ever done" (82). What does she mean by that? Based on what you know of Mr. Mac's architectural designs, how does his work seem connected to the natural world?
- 14) Stories of World War I so often focus on the battles of men. How does the war change the lives of the women in *Mr. Mac and Me*? Where do their lives intersect with the narrative of war, both directly and indirectly?
- 15) Thomas's connection to the ocean seems to come to a head at the end of the novel, at once bringing about great endings and new beginnings. How does Esther Freud use the ocean to create resolution? What are you left wondering at the end of the book?

Suggested reading:

The Care and Management of Lies by Jacqueline Winspear; *The Daughters of Mars* by Thomas Keneally; *Mister Pip* by Lloyd Jones; *Somewhere in France* by Jennifer Robson; *A Soldier of the Great War* by Mark Helprin; *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr; *Paddy Clark Ha Ha Ha* by Roddy Doyle; *Birdsong* by Sebastian Faulks; *Atonement* by Ian McEwan; *The Night Watch* by Sarah Waters; *Lucky Us* by Amy Bloom; *The Stranger's Child* by Alan Hollinghurst; *The Return of the Soldier* by Rebecca West; *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque; *How Green Was My Valley* by Richard Llewellyn.