

Alice Jolly -- The Matchbox Girl

'Matchboxes. I recommend Matchboxes. Organised in straight lines and Clearly Categorised.'

What is the role of matchboxes in this novel? Why does Adelheid need to find a perfect way to organise her collection? How does this link to the situation in Vienna in 1934 (at the beginning of the novel)? How does shape it Adelheid's approach to her own life and also her reactions to rise of the Third Reich?

'Any Fool may be able to say what should have been done once the moment is passed.'

Most of THE MATCHBOX GIRL is written in the present tense so the reader sees events unfold in real time. However, there are 'retrospective' sections which look back on what happened. As a reader, do you prefer 'real time' or 'retrospective.' What are the gains and losses of these contrasting narrative approaches?

Dr Josef Feldner comments that Adelheid is *'probably quite normal when in a room on her own.'*

Does Adelheid have 'a problem' or is she living in a society which is highly problematic in many different ways? How much of what we categorise as neurological conditions may actually be aggravated by environmental and societal factors?

Dr Lorna Wing, the pioneering British psychiatrist who rediscovered Dr Asperger's work in the 1980s said, *'Nature never draws a line without smudging it'*. The Curative Education Ward in Vienna did not diagnose or label the children in their care because they felt that each child is entirely unique. How do diagnosis of the body and diagnosis of the mind differ? What can diagnosis achieve? What might be the downsides of attempting to diagnosis conditions of the mind?

Adelheid tells us that she, and others in the novel, are 'watchers' and 'observers' but she also says that she is telling us a story of *'blindness'*.

Where in the novel do you find moments where the characters both know and don't know? Does this novel help to explain how people living under the Third Reich saw, or suspected, what was really happening and yet failed to act?

Dr Felder says to Dr Asperger, *'I suppose we all have our different forms of resistance.'*

We tend to think of resistance as organising petitions, waving banners, or writing letters of protest, but resistance exists in hundreds of different forms and may not be clearly visible. What specifically motivates the characters in this novel who resist? How exactly do they resist? Are their actions effective in any way?

'The Human Being is not designed to live in a constant State of Fear.'

Towards the end of the novel, all the characters are living in a constant state of terror, yet they continue with the daily tasks they must perform. Can you identify moments in this novel where distraction is dangerous? Are there also moments when distraction plays an important role in making it possible for the characters to get through each day despite their fears?

'Was it science that untangled the knots or merely love?'

Dr Asperger is often credited with the discovery of autism, but this novel suggests that he was largely codifying the ideas of others (usually with their consent). Why has the contribution of some been prioritised over the efforts of others? Why and how were the work, and the ideas, of the women in this book overlooked?

Adelheid says at the end of the book, *'A crime is a crime, murder is murder. The Truth must be that he was an Evil Man'*

What do we feel about Dr Asperger at the end of this novel? Do we accept that people can be both good and bad? How does our thinking on this question affect how we live our lives?

At the end of the novel, Adelheid says, *'No-one has been Absolved, Redeemed, Healed'*

As a reader, do you like a novel to come to a definite resolution? Or do you welcome a novel which leaves many questions open? Why do we continue to debate the events which led up to the Second World War? What is the role of the novel in answering questions – or failing to answer them?

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