

The Plum Tree Study Guide

The Plum Tree by Ellen Marie Wiseman

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Plot Summary

“The Plum Tree” is a historical novel by Ellen Marie Wiseman which recounts the experiences of German civilians before, during, and after World War II through the eyes of young Christine Bolz, from the age of seventeen in 1938 through the summer of 1945.

When the novel begins, Christine dreams of marrying Isaac, the older, handsome son of the people who employ her and her mother as domestics. Christine deeply loves her own family, and dreams of beginning one with Isaac. However, Hitler’s rise to power, as well as new laws, make this impossible because Isaac is Jewish while Christine is a German Christian. Even as things become difficult, Christine and Isaac continue to secretly see one another. Eventually, it becomes too dangerous, and they must stop. Things get even worse in 1940 as Jews and other people deemed inferior by the Nazis are rounded up and taken to concentration camps. Isaac and his own family are taken to Dachau.

Meanwhile, as the war rages and the Allies begin bombing Germany, food and other resources are in short supply for Christine and her family. They scrape to get by, and manage to barely hold on. Christine’s father is forcibly drafted into the Germany army and sent to the Eastern Front to fight the Russians, where he is captured. Isaac is conscripted into a labor detachment that returns him to his home village to repair a nearby airfield, and Christine is thrilled to see he is still alive. She and her mother—as well as other villagers—begin to secretly leave food for Isaac and his fellow prisoners, for they appear starved. During an escape attempt, Christine hides Isaac in her family’s attic, but is later found out when the SS search the house. She and Isaac are both then sent to Dachau.

In Dachau, Christine sees the horrors of the Holocaust firsthand, from indiscriminate killing and beatings to murder on a mass scale by gassing and cremation. She also knows one of the SS guards, Stefan, who is the boyfriend of Christine’s former best friend, Kate. Christine becomes the cook to an upper-level officer named Grunstein, who one night drunkenly reveals he hates everything going on at the camp and intends to serve as a witness against the atrocities committed there. As the Allies close in on southern Germany, executions increase and Christine believes Isaac has been killed. When the Americans liberate the camp, Christine returns home and befriends an American soldier named Jake.

When Christine sees that Stefan is walking around freely, she outs him only to have Stefan react by falsely accusing Christine’s recently-returned father as a war criminal. Christine then returns to Dachau with Jake’s help, where she is stunned to find Isaac is still alive and helping the Americans. She is also glad to know that Grunstein is alive and actively cooperating with the Americans. A plot is hatched whereby Grunstein writes to Stefan to organize a prison break, and when Stefan arrives at the camp, he is arrested and positively identified by Grunstein. Isaac also reveals that Stefan is the man

who killed his father. Christine's father is released, and Christine and Isaac quickly marry as the novel ends.



Chapters 1 – 8

Summary

Chapter 1 – Seventeen year-old Christine Bolz lives in Germany's Kocher River Valley. It is the autumn of 1938. She seeks out flowers in the woods for her grandparents' anniversary and is joined by Isaac Bauerman, the son of the wealthy family that employs her as a domestic servant. Isaac is a university student, and his parents are generous employers. Christine dresses as well as she can for work, which her Mutti, or mother, Rose, dislikes since their family is working class and can't afford nice clothing. Christine sometimes borrows clothing from her best friend, Kate, to wear on the job, all to look as pretty as possible for Isaac. Isaac's parents hope he will marry a girl named Luisa, the daughter of family friends, but Isaac intends to marry whom he chooses. He and Christine kiss.

Christine knows her mother disapproves of her feelings for Isaac, for there are many differences between their families, including that Isaac and his family are Jewish whereas Christine and her family are Christian. This does not bother Isaac in the least, and he invites Christine to be his date to his family's December party, a major social event in the area for the wealthy and powerful. But this year, Isaac reveals, the party will not be as big, for many of the Jews who usually attend have left the country. Christine agrees to go with him and then runs back to their village.

Chapter 2 – Isaac lends Christine a lucky stone given to him by his father which features a small snail fossil from the Triassic Period. It is meant to bring Christine luck until she and Isaac tell Rose they will be attending the December party together. Christine reflects on how her grandparents, Oma and Opa, explained that Germany has been in very bad shape since the Great War. Hitler and the Nazis have promised to relieve poverty and suffering, but so far this has not happened. Christine's own father, Dietrich, is a stonemason in and out of work, and struggles to help provide for Christine and her three younger siblings, Maria, Henrich, and Karl.

On her way home, Christine stops to tell Kate she is in love with Isaac and discovers that Kate is home with a boy named Stefan Eichmann. The two have been making out, and Christine promises to talk to Kate the following day. As she continues home, Christine comes across a number of posters revealing a new law stating that Jews cannot be Reich citizens. At home, Rose reveals that they will no longer be working for Baumerman, for new laws forbid it. Isaac's father has also had to shut down his law practice due to the new laws as well. It is now too dangerous to even associate with them. In different times, Rose would not have minded her daughter's feelings for Isaac, but under the Nazis, it cannot be tolerated. Rose has one last opportunity to go and pick up pay from the Baumernas, so she agrees to bring along a note for Isaac from Christine. The note asks for forgiveness and expresses Christine's hope to find a way to be together.



Chapter 3 – While Christine and her family pray over their midday meal, SS troops knock on the door. Dietrich answers and then reveals to his family that the SS have been distributing state-approved radios to replace private shortwave models. The new state radios only pick up two Nazi-run stations, whereas the old radios can pick up stations in other countries, something which is now illegal. Dietrich has told the SS troops that he does not have such a radio, so that he can use it for firewood for his family. Dietrich is furious with the rise of the Nazis and furious that the other political parties were too busy fighting with one another to have stopped Hitler from taking power.

Rose quietly tells Christine that Isaac has sent back a note, which urges Christine to meet him behind the Market Café that night at eleven. She hides the note in her teddy bear. Christine tells fifteen year-old Maria that she and Isaac are in love, which thrills Maria. Maria is likewise angered by the Nazis forbidding contact with Jews and curses them. Maria tries to be positive, thinking it can't last forever, and says that love conquers all.

Chapter 4 – As Christine sneaks out, she hears Hitler on the radio announcing that the German annexation of Austria is complete, all to the unhappiness of her family. Christine later meets with Isaac, who reveals the Gestapo have shut down his father's business. Most of his family has relocated to Poland, while his uncle has gone to America. Isaac's father wants to go to America, too, but his mother believes the family will be all right since she herself is half-Christian. Christine and Isaac agree to meet again one week at the same time in the same place. He tells Christine to keep his lucky rock, and they kiss.

Chapter 5 – Over the next weeks, more posters with new laws go up in the village, which enrages Christine. She continues to meet with Isaac at night each week as things get worse for Jews and those who associate with them. One such event is Kristallnacht, in which dozens of Jews are killed, twenty thousand are arrested, and innumerable Jewish-owned businesses destroyed. Christine and Isaac begin meeting in a cellar storeroom shared by multiple businesses. He sadly reveals he has had to stop attending school, and with no legal way to work, he cannot be a good husband. Christine is not worried, saying that all she wants is to be his wife.

As 1939 comes on, things continue to change. Christine and Isaac now meet only once a month. Hitler sends troops into Bohemia and Moravia. A forced labor camp is constructed at Dachau in Southern Germany. Kate officially begins dating Stefan, which saddens Christine, for she cannot have the same kind of relationship. She grows closer to Maria as Kate draws away, absorbed in Nazi lies Stefan tells. On September 1, Germany invades Poland, officially declaring war with Great Britain as well. SS thugs show up and take all of the Baumermans' possessions. The Jews in Poland meet the same fate as Jews in Germany. Isaac ends the meetings between him and Christine, knowing it is now too dangerous to continue. They burn their initials into an old tablecloth, and decide they will use it as their wedding in the future when things are safe again.



Chapter 6 – In November, German families are forced into a rationing system, where what they may purchase each month, from food to clothing, is heavily restricted and limited. The majority of the nation's resources must go to the war effort. As Christmas comes on, Christine and Maria look for a tree, and the family exchange simple, handmade gifts. Christine sadly thinks about Isaac. Her mother comforts her, telling her she will see him again when the madness ends.

While walking on the other side of town, Christine sees Isaac's father, weary and unhappy, working in his garden. In the spring, Stefan is drafted as Germany prepares for a new phase of war against Great Britain, now being led by conservative Winston Churchill. Christine and Kate go to Herr Schmidt's café. Kate tells Christine she has to forget about Isaac and says that Stefan blames everything that is happening on the Jews. An old man is interrogated by an SS officer named Kruger and his associate, demanding to know the old man's race. The old man drops his identity papers, and Christine, who goes to pick them up, is threatened with arrest if she does so. The papers check out, and the officers leave. Kate tells Christine to be more careful, because there are rumors circulating that Jews are being rounded up and taken away.

Chapter 7 – France surrenders to Germany in June, 1940, as the scope of the war increases. Meanwhile, Allied bombing raids on German cities increase. Christine and Maria take comfort in the fact that at least the Allies, unlike the Germans, are not intentionally targeting civilians. German troops descend upon Christine's village, removing every scrap of iron they can, including the church bells. At Christmas, Christine's father is drafted into the military. Christine and her family are heartbroken.

Chapter 8 – Things get worse for German families as rations are cut and resources frequently run out. The Allies begin bombing nearby cities and towns. Dietrich is sent to the Eastern Front against the Russians in an engineering capacity, such as digging trenches. By the spring, most men have been drafted, and so little planting is done, except by women who already have their hands full. Young girls between fourteen and seventeen are drafted into government services, while young boys are drafted into groups like the Hitler Youth. Christine, Maria, and their mother take on work repairing military uniforms. Jews in Germany are now required to wear stars, and are forbidden from leaving the country. The village of Heilbronn, thirty-five miles away from Christine, is bombed.

Analysis

"The Plum Tree" is a historical novel by Ellen Marie Wiseman which recounts the experiences of German civilians before, during, and after World War II as seen through the eyes of young Christine Bolz, from the age of seventeen in 1938 through the summer of 1945. When the novel begins, the themes of family and love can be clearly seen above all other events unfolding in 1938. Family means everything to both Isaac and Christine, who in turn mean everything to each other.



Indeed, Christine greatly enjoys the time she is able to spend with her family. She has an especially close relationship with her mother, Rose, and her sister, Maria. She tells them both everything that goes on in her life, including about her romantic attachment to Isaac. The reader should here note that Rose's opposition to Christine's dating Isaac has nothing to do with personal prejudices, but has everything to do with Hitler's laws. Indeed, Rose wouldn't care at all if Christine married Isaac, but the law forbids this under penalty of severe punishment. Rose's concern is motivated from maternal love.

Love is especially important when it comes to the romance between Isaac and Christine. Their love for one another is clearly apparent even as the laws become stricter, and the punishments harsher. They risk their freedom to continue to see one another, even in secret. Maria is hopeful, telling Christine that in the end, love conquers all. The forbidden love between Christine and Isaac is reminiscent in certain ways of Shakespeare tragedy, "Romeo and Juliet," though Christine and Isaac are kept apart by the government rather than their families.

The government is firmly in control of the Nazi Party and Hitler, and here, Nazism can also be seen as an especially encompassing theme. Nazism is presented thematically in numerous ways. The laws that keep Christine and Isaac apart, as well as the laws which persecute Jews and other people deemed to be inferior by the Nazis, are the manifestations of the vile racism and bigotry inherent in Nazi ideology. The sheer power that even lower-level Nazi Party members and SS officers wield is also striking, for they strut around the village as if they are entitled to control the place.

The complete control over even the daily lives of German citizens is striking in all aspects. The families of Christine's village are given state-approved radios which can only be tuned into two-state approved Nazi stations. Nazi posters denoting new laws and propaganda are plastered everywhere, even on private property. As Hitler declares war against Poland, Great Britain, France, and other nations, the theme of war also comes to coincide with Nazism. The Nazis have started World War II, and now their people will pay the price for their actions.

The effects of the war are quickly felt by the people. Food, gas, water, and other resources are heavily rationed as most of these items are diverted for the war effort. German troops descend on the village to remove every scrap of iron they can, including church bells. Families are forced surrender any spare materials they can for the war effort as well. By 1940, a draft has been instituted to fill the ranks of the German army, and men and boys are forcibly removed from their homes to fight. Even the young do not escape service, as they are forced into paramilitary organizations. Christine and her family take on extra work repairing uniforms.

The reader should note Christine's perplexity at how the Nazis could have ever come to power. Her grandparents reveal that the country had previously been even worse off in the Depression. Desperate people do desperate things, especially when they are appealed to on their basest levels. The Nazis took power promising to change everything for the better, but things have only gotten worse. Their hold on power means forcing compliance from the people, and enables them to sustain themselves and the



war effort by controlling their own people. Many people who do not support the Nazis have been intimidated into fearful submission. They see what treatment the Jews receive, and do not wish to receive the same treatment.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Christine find it so difficult to accept that the Nazis are in charge of Germany? How have the Nazis come to power in Germany?

Discussion Question 2

Why do Christine and Isaac continue to see one another romantically even after such contact is forbidden by law? If you were in Christine or Isaac's place, would you do the same? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Even in its first two years, World War II dramatically affected the lives of average German citizens. How? Define three ways German civilians suffer, and explain how they handle these challenges.

Vocabulary

intermingled, immortal, reminiscing, intoxicating, bewitched, punctuate, monotone, admonished, spontaneous, spontaneous, seldom, oblivious, bland



Chapters 9 – 16

Summary

Chapter 9 – In late 1941, the United States enters World War II. As more German cities are bombed, German troops descend on Christine's village to warn citizens about the potential for attacks, to force attendance at a planned Nazi rally, and to construct German planes on the move, shifting operations so as to avoid being bombed. The Nazis issue blackout orders which mandate the extinguishing all lights at night are also put into effect. Meanwhile, air raid shelters are readied.

Chapter 10 – The entire village is forced to attend an SS-led Nazi Party rally that night. The rally is also dedicated to inciting hatred toward Jews. Hitler himself speaks at the rally. The name of Christine's village is here revealed for the first time, Hessental. Christine is led out of the crowd by an SS soldier. She is sent up on stage with several other girls, and held up as a model Aryan. Hitler then shakes their hands, and Christine hesitates, but complies. Hitler personally invites her to become a part of the Lebensborn program. It sickens her. She can see in his eyes just how evil he is, and hates how much of the world he has ruined. At home, she can't seem to clean her hand enough. She tells Maria that she promises to God they will all get through this.

Chapter 11 – German planes take off from the nearby airfield they have commandeered and expanded. The noise is unwelcome to Christine and her family. One night, air raid sirens go off, and Christine and her family rush to the bomb shelters just as the airfield is hit. Several bombs also fall on the city. Christine and her family return home only to be awakened once more a short time later by another siren.

Chapter 12 – The air raids increase and occur during the day as the Americans become involved. As the summer wears on, more and more of the village is bombed. Food becomes scarce, and Rose trades a beautiful tapestry she and Dietrich purchased on their honeymoon to Frau Klause for a rooster. On the way home with the rooster, Christine and Heinrich are nearly killed in a strafing run. However, the attack kills Farmer Klause and several others. The rooster is also killed. Rose reveals their old radio has not been burned, and she and Christine listen to it, learning of desperate conditions on the Eastern Front. The Sixth Army, of which Dietrich is a member, is trapped at Stalingrad.

Chapter 13 – In late January, 1943, the Sixth Army surrenders. Christine and her family pray that Dietrich is still alive. A letter arrives from Dietrich. It was written around Christmas and says he will do everything in his power to see them again. By February, the loss of the Sixth Army is publicly announced, and new draft orders are sent out for men as old as sixty-five to join the Volkssturm and boys as young as twelve to join anti-aircraft batteries. Photos and leaflets detailing Soviet atrocities committed against ethnic German women and children in Ukraine as the Germany military withdraws are distributed to people in the village. The crimes shock and horrify Christine and the



others. News comes of the Allies using new incendiary bombs against cities and civilians.

Chapter 14 – In September, 1943, thousands of people including Jews are rounded up and sent to Dachau. Christine races over to the Bauermans'. Isaac is angry she has risked her life to come and see them. Isaac reveals they are being transported to work in a munitions factory. He tells her he loves her and that he always will. On her way home she is approached by two SS officers who hope to engage in sexual relations with her, but she pretends she is caring for her mother who has typhus, which causes them to back off quickly. At home, Christine tells her mother she worries that the Bauermans may end up at Dachau. It is rumored people are dying there.

Chapter 15 – Christine and Maria go to work in Farmer Erkert's apple orchard, for both of Erkert's sons have been killed in the war. At the extent of the farm, Christine sees a train full of hungry people, and she throws them apples as the train goes past. Christine is terrified to think that Isaac and his family could be on the train. She goes for a walk up the mountain to clear her mind, during which time she watches, frozen, as a bombing raid is conducted against the area. When the planes leave, she rushes home. Her house is still standing but her family is out. Her grandfather has been killed trying to extinguish the fire in the family barn, and her grandmother has been lightly injured, but is alive. Christine is relieved to later learn her mother and three siblings are all alive. Christine is devastated, for all the men in her life are now gone.

Chapter 16 – Christine's grandfather's body is never found. More than half the village is now in ruins. The street on which Christine and her family live –Schellergasse Strasse – has been especially hard hit. A barracks is constructed near the train station, with the rumor that it will house prisoners intended to rebuild the airfield. Christine is horrified by the sight of them when they arrive. They are wearing white-and-gray striped clothing, are very thin, and have been shaved bald. At home Christine begins to cry. Each day, the prisoners are marched off to work twelve-hour days. The prisoners are marched along the churchyard, where Christine and Rose decide to leave food for them. Christine know she will not be able to live with herself if she does nothing. As time goes on, other villagers begin leaving food out for the prisoners, but, surprisingly, the guards allow this to occur.

One day, Christine watches in horror as some prisoners attempt to escape and are gunned down. She notices that among the prisoners who do not try to escape is Isaac. She encourages him to escape while the guards are preoccupied with the escapees. Christine hides Isaac in the family henhouse. There, he explains his father was killed three months before, that he has been at Dachau, and that he hasn't seen his mother or sister since the day he arrived at Dachau. She brings him milk and food.

Analysis

In this section of the novel, war comes to the Kocher River Valley. The citizens of the towns and villages in the area are given a firsthand glimpse at life under fire, as German



aerial operations are moved nearby, Jewish work prisoners are boarded in town, and the village itself is hit by bombing raids. People die as a result, including Christine's own grandfather, which shakes her to her very core.

Perhaps equally as disturbing as the loss of Christine's grandfather is the appearance of Hitler himself. Hitler exudes evil, something which Christine can quite clearly see in his eyes. His invitation to her to join the Lebensborn program is just as chilling. The reader should note that the Lebensborn program was a project where the Nazis intended to increase the birthrate by promoting sex among young people, children born outside of marriage, and girls surrendering their bodies to any Aryan man that would have them in order to reproduce.

The program also sought to end the social stigma about children born outside of marriage due to the fact that these children were intended for Germany, not families. Here, the twisted nature of Nazism can again be seen as it becomes especially strong thematically. The Nazis not only want to eradicate people they deem to be inferior, but want to compel superior young girls and women to have as many babies as possible, in and out of marriage. Christine rightly recoils not just from this invitation, but also from having shaken Hitler's hand.

The prisoners in town also demonstrate the twisted ideology of Nazis. Having rounded up people deemed to be inferior, the Nazis send these people to concentration camps where they are forced into labor, and/or are exterminated. Isaac becomes part of a detail sent to Hesselental to work on the nearby airfield. The prisoners give the citizens of the village their first true glimpse of the magnitude of Nazi barbarity. Numerous civilians, including Christine and Rose, leave food by the wayside for Isaac and his fellow workers to pick up and eat, so starved and weakened are they by their treatment. While many of the citizens are afraid to speak out against the Nazis they are willing to defy the Nazis less noticeable, but still defiant ways.

The effects of the Nazi-started war are also seen in the way the town reels when the Allies begin to bomb the area. The sound of planes and sirens become commonplace, and the sound of bombs becomes terrifying. Air raid shelters are set up, and people are often roused from sleep in the middle of the night by air raid alarms. Many of the people in the village also lose loved ones, in the bombings, and in the war itself. Christine and Maria go to work for a farmer who has lost both his sons in the war, for example.

Yet, it is a sense of family that helps Christine to survive. She takes great comfort in the fact that at least her mother, grandmother, and sisters are all still alive. Yet, she is equally saddened by the fact that the three men in her life--her father, her boyfriend, and her grandfather--are no longer a part of her life. Because of this, Christine feels incredibly lost, and like her life is not complete. Her experiences mirror the experiences of numerous other German citizens, and civilians from around the world as well for that matter. War touches everyone and everything.

When Christine hides Isaac away in her attic, the theme of love can again be noted in their immediate closeness and relief. Christine explains that thoughts of Isaac have kept



her going, and Isaac explains that thoughts of Christine have kept him going. Christine's love for Isaac is unmatched by anything else in the world, even fear of reprisal against her for hiding Isaac in the attic, a crime punishable by imprisonment at the very least.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Christine take such a risk in hiding Isaac? Would you have done the same thing? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Christine feel such a need to wash her hand after meeting Hitler? What is the experience like for her? How does she cope with it?

Discussion Question 3

While many of the German people are not yet exactly sure what is happening to the Jews, most do not try to find out. Why? If you were a German citizen and heard such rumors, would you try to find out the truth behind them? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

gargantuan, aroma, edifice, adamant, fitful, lethargic, medieval, frantic, coagulated



Chapters 17 – 24

Summary

Chapter 17 – Isaac worries that he is putting Christine and her entire family in danger, and wants to leave. Christine won't hear of it. She moves him into the attic in the middle of the night, instead. Isaac reveals the Germans are murdering tens of thousands of people besides Jews, including Gypsies, cripples, the mentally imbalanced, and the elderly. The Germans are using giant ovens to do it. The camps are full of disease and cruelty. Isaac tells Christine that thoughts of her kept him going. Christine tells him the same is true for her.

Chapter 18 – Christine wakes up early to bring Isaac some food. She lies to her mother about the number of eggs laid by the hens overnight to cover for giving two of them to Isaac. Rose and her other three children will be joining Christine's grandmother in transplanting flowers to the family plot. With the family gone, Christine brings Isaac downstairs to bathe, and gives him some of her father's old clothing to wear. Christine is dismayed to see that the number 1071504 has been tattooed on Isaac's arm. They kiss passionately and nearly have sex, but Christine stops things from going that far, worried her family may return at any moment. She then returns Isaac to the attic and burns his camp clothing. She goes to work in the garden outside and notices two SS officers--the ones she told her mother had typhoid--walking up the street. It unnerves her.

Chapter 19 – A few days later, one of the SS officers arrive at Christine's home with two soldiers to search the house and outbuildings, explaining a prisoner has gone missing and that every building in town is being searched. Christine is terrified. Her mother explains they have seen no prisoner. The SS nevertheless searches the house but do not find Isaac hiding in the attic's secret room. Later, Christine goes to see him and insists they both leave the country.

Chapter 20 – After the rain the next morning, Christine sits down on the back steps and cries for everything she has lost and for everything that others have lost as well. She is stunned when her father returns home, thin and exhausted, but alive. The entire family is thrilled to have him back. He explains that he was captured and later escaped from the Russians. However, he will have to report in to the army now that he has returned. He is horrified to hear what is happening to the Jews and explains to Christine that many men in the army are fighting because they must, and not because they share or even support Hitler's beliefs. Christine later speaks to Isaac about her father's return and suggests Isaac wear an SS officer's uniform while Christine pretends to be his wife.

Chapter 21 – Dietrich says goodbye to his family early the next morning and heads out to report into the army. As he leaves, the SS officer returns once more to search the house, knowing that the family used to work for Isaac's parents. They discover Isaac in the secret room. Isaac says the family did not know he was hiding in the attic. The SS



officer does not believe him. Christine confesses to having hid him there, and she and Isaac are both arrested.

Chapter 22 – Christine and Isaac hold each other, but are forced apart by the Germans as they arrive at the train station and barracks. Isaac is beaten with a rifle. They are brought before the Hauptsturmführer, who sexually fondles Christine. Isaac and Christine are then loaded on a train for Dachau. Isaac and Christine vow to survive and reunite when everything is over. Isaac reminds her to tell the guards she is a German.

Chapter 23 – At Dachau, Isaac, Christine, and the other prisoners they have been traveling with are offloaded and separated by sex. Christine notes that one of the guards is Kate's boyfriend, Stefan. Christine's head is shaved, and she and the other women are ordered out of their clothing. They are then forcibly showered and divided according to health. Christine tells the overseeing officer she is German, has been falsely accused, and is a good cook. The officer decides she will replace Lagerkommandant Grunstein's cook. Christine's wrist is then tattooed with the number 11091986. She is then taken by a Blockführer to a kitchen where the existing cook is taken out. Christine then meets Grunstein, who says properly doing the job of cook could save Christine's life. After dinner, Christine is sent to sleep in the barracks with the other women.

Chapter 24 – Christine is welcomed into the female barracks, where women and girls of all ages sleep. Christine asks if anyone knows Nina Bauerman, or her daughter, Gabriella. A woman responds that Christine won't find the girl or her mother. The next morning, Christine awakens to find the woman she has been sleeping next to is now dead. Christine meets a woman named Hanna and then watches as the guards execute sickly women on the spot. At Grunstein's, Christine seeks to ask about Isaac, which enrages Grunstein. In the garden, Christine sees the crematorium in operation. She throws up, and Grunstein comes and speak to her. Grunstein says that one day he'll be able to tell the world about the murders of so many people, if he himself is still alive.

Back in the female barracks, Hanna gives Christine more important information. She warns Christine to stay away from the Blockälteste, a female prisoner who acts as an informant for the Germans in exchange for double rations. Hanna reveals that no one else will trust Christine since she is not Jewish and works for Grunstein. She also explains that Gabriella is dead, having been gassed and cremated shortly after arriving. Nina died three months before of typhus. Hanna knows this because she works with female prisoner records. She has been at Dachau for two years, with her entire family now dead.

Analysis

Christine continues to risk everything as she tends to, and cares for Isaac over the next few weeks. She takes great comfort in the fact that at least Isaac is alive, if not exactly safe for the time being. Her love for Isaac continues to outweigh all other concerns and worries, including for her own safety. The reader can clearly see just how true



Christine's love for Isaac is as she takes such risks and as she later gives herself up in defense of her family when Isaac is found out.

Christine is elated when her father returns home from the Eastern Front. He brings word of how the entire Sixth Army had surrendered to the Russians, and how he and a few others managed to escape. Dietrich also reveals that many of the soldiers fighting are only fighting because they have been forced to do so. Here, the reader should note how the themes of Nazism and war coincide. The German war effort is kept alive by the Nazis forcing German men and boys to fight at the front, under threat of execution for desertion or refusal.

Even though Dietrich has escaped the horrors of the Eastern Front, his own ordeal is not yet over. He must now immediately report back to the Army for reassignment, or he will be declared a deserter and/or a traitor, and shot. This comes from the manpower shortages the Nazis are being forced to deal with in part and also from the twisted idea that people can be forced to fight for something which they do not believe.

Christine's arrival at Dachau, like her father's return home, is eye-opening. The place is Hell on Earth. Fortunately Christine is assigned to the Grustein kitchen, which keeps her mostly away from the worst parts of the camp, though these can still be seen. Grustein, surprisingly, reveals to Christine that he intends to act as a witness to the murders that have gone on at Dachau when all is said and done.

Grustein's small, defiant remark is enough to get him shot –and his decision to trust Christine by uttering this perhaps comes in part at his sympathy toward her first experience of the crematorium. Here, the reader comes to realize that there are even men like Grustein, assigned to the camps, who want no part of them but have little choice in the matter with the Nazis. However, Grustein is under no misconceptions about how far he can go for the time being, becoming enraged when Christine presses the case of Isaac.

The reader should also note that Christine has had a number tattooed on her forearm, along with all of the other members of Dachau. It is something that has permanently, physically stained her, and is physically symbolic of the mental and emotional stain that is growing in Christine's soul from having experienced a place like Dachau.

Family also returns as a theme in this section of the novel as Christine comes to understand that many families have been torn apart by the Nazis and their concentration camps. Isaac's mother and sister are long dead; and Hanna is the sole surviving member of her own family. Christine feels horrible about this, for she knows her family is largely intact but may not remain that way for long depending on the course of the war.

Discussion Question 1

Why do you believe Grustein trusts Christine enough to reveal that he intends to be a witness to the atrocities committed at Dachau?



Discussion Question 2

How does Christine manage to avoid worst treatment at Dachau? What are her responsibilities? How does she carry them out?

Discussion Question 3

What does Christine's father reveal about the willingness to fight of the soldiers on the Eastern Front? Why is this important for both Christine and the reader to understand?

Vocabulary

nonchalant, jittery, truncheon, sauntered, putrid, intermittent, guttural, resonance, overindulgence, permeated, reverie



Chapters 25 – 32

Summary

Chapter 25 – Christine comes to accept working in Grunstein's house as a blessing in disguise. She is not exposed to the harassment and beatings the others witness. Hanna promises to look into the male prisoner files when she has the chance to do so.

Grunstein allows Christine to eat his table scraps and to help herself to small portions of the meals she cooks him. Five weeks later, Christine finds Grunstein drunk. He orders her to sit down and talk with him. He unhappily explains that a plot to assassinate Hitler has failed. The conspirators have been executed and their families have been arrested.

Grunstein reveals his own story. He was an early member of the Nazi Party, thrown out for questioning their methods, sent to a forced labor camp, and then later reapplied to join the SS to gather information. He did this because the Bishop of Stuttgart revealed the execution of mentally-ill patients at Hadamar and Grafneckk, where Grunstein's own sister was killed. In the SS, Grunstein was sent to deliver chemicals to other camps around Europe. Whenever he has the chance, Grunstein tells Catholics, resistance members, and foreign dignitaries about the atrocities. He tells Christine she is a witness to the fact that not everyone agrees with what is going on at the camps, that there are guards who are so desperate to get away they want to be sent to fight on the collapsing Eastern Front.

Grunstein asks Christine to remember his story if he should die. Christine says she will and asks if Grunstein can look into Isaac's situation. Grunstein tells her that even if there was a way for him to find out if Isaac is alive, there would be no way of keeping him alive. While out in the garden one day, Christine sees Isaac and sneaks him some food. She later learns that Hanna has been taken away for looking in the files of male prisoners. Christine asks Grunstein about Hanna, which enrages Grunstein. Grunstein says he will not risk his life for someone who will not stay out of trouble.

Chapter 26 – Spring slowly comes. More and more people are gassed and cremated. As the Allies close in on Germany, tens of thousands of prisoners from camps elsewhere are herded into Germany. Patience wears thin among the guards and officers. She sees Isaac head out into the woods with a large group of other prisoners and guards, and then hears gunfire. She believes Isaac has been killed. The next morning, the prisoners are overjoyed when the Americans arrive at the camp and begin arresting every Nazi in sight while also beginning to dispense medical care and food. The Americans then execute the German guards.

Chapter 27 – Christine is thrilled to learn that Hanna is still alive, having been locked up in solitary confinement. Along with the other prisoners, they take food and clothing from storage, and say prayers of thanks to the dead who have left such things behind. American trucks later arrive with German civilians, who have been instructed to bring food and supplies for the prisoners. The civilians are led through the camp to see the



atrocities committed and are then ordered to bury the dead. Christine is frustrated because she knows the Americans don't understand how much innocent German civilians have suffered already. The prisoners are then guided out by the Americans, who organize to help them get home. Surprisingly, Hesselental is where the effort takes place.

Chapter 28 – Christine is thrilled to learn from an American soldier that she is in Hesselental. The American soldier, Jake, brings Christine home. Along the way, she sees that the SS have hung small boys for not wanting to fight. Christine is thrilled to see her house along with its plum trees in the front come into view. The entire family rushes to embrace her. Maria reveals she has had her own close encounter digging trenches with other girls when the Russians arrived and proceeded to rape every girl they could find. Maria and some other girls finally escaped by dressing like boys. Christine sadly tells her mother that Isaac is dead.

Chapter 29 – Christine's family nurses her back to health. When she is better, Jake comes to check in on her, to see how she is doing. He leaves her a gift of Hershey's Chocolate and a tin of a sweet hazelnut paste. Meanwhile, Maria cries at night, believing no man will want to touch her after having been raped so many times. Christine assures her this is not so. Christine knows, however, that the memories of Dachau and her sister's memories of the front will stay with them forever.

Chapter 30 – The village begins to rebuild. Many of the village girls are dating American soldiers. Some are even marrying them and going to America. Maria discovers that tragically she is pregnant from the rapes, but Christine will not let Maria attempt to lose the baby, remembering how easily children were killed at Dachau.

Chapter 31 – Christine continues to recover and begins to go out on her mountain walks again. Kate comes to visit and has a hard time believing the stories of Dachau and the other camps. She also reveals Stefan has come home, and they are to be married and that he still has his black SS uniform. Christine reveals Stefan's role at the camps but Kate does not believe it. She storms out. Christine reveals what happened to her mother and grandmother, who say that God will be the final judge of everyone. Christine is still saddened since Stefan is alive and Isaac is not.

Chapter 32 – Christine is horrified that evil people like Stefan can still be free when so many others are still suffering. Stefan grabs Christine one day and threatens her life and her family's lives if she doesn't stay away from Kate, or says anything to anyone about him.

Analysis

Christine's continued working for Grustein adds another level to depth to the complex relationship that many Germans have with Nazism, or in spite of Nazism. Grustein reveals three important facts that the reader should bear in mind when regarding his character, and even some of the guards at the camp. First, Grustein himself is clearly



opposed to what is going on at the camp. Drink has loosened his tongue in honesty. Second, there are guards would rather risk probable death fighting the Russians on the Eastern Front than be a party to genocide at the camps. Third, Grustein is not merely playing politics, realizing the war is lost and seeking to get in good with the prisoners of the camp to save himself. The death of his own sister due to Nazism, as well as the fact that the Bishop of Stuttgart opened his eyes to the absolute truth of things, all factor into Grustein's opposition to Nazism.

When the Americans liberate Dachau a short time later, they are stunned and horrified by what they have come across. Their anger is understandable, and their heartfelt sympathy for the prisoners clear. They do everything they can for the people suffering at the camps and even execute many of the officers and guards they have encountered still lingering at the camp. However, the reader should bear in mind here in this section again that not all Germans agreed with Nazism or their genocidal tendencies. Many of the German civilians marched through Dachau and forced to bury bodies truly did not support what was going on at Dachau, but this matters little. They are guilty by association, even if they had nothing personally to do with what was going on. Christine is dismayed by this, though she can understand why many would believe all the Germans stood behind Hitler. The reader knows, however, that many Germans stood behind Hitler not out of loyalty and belief, but fear.

Here, the themes of Nazism and war can be clearly seen by the reader in that the crimes the Nazis have committed have come back to haunt all of Germany. The war has left no one unscathed. And what is most traumatic of all for Christine, beyond Isaac's apparent death, is that Nazis like Stefan are freely walking around as if they never were a party to murder and people like Kate still support them.

Now, even in the aftermath of war, people are still suffering because of the war. It takes Christine weeks to be able to be strong enough to journey around the area once more. Much of the village lies in ruins, and the people must rebuild the buildings around them, as well as their own lives in order to get on. Just because the war is over does not mean its effects have also disappeared. Just because Christine is no longer imprisoned at Dachau does not mean the effects of having been there have gone, either in memory, or in the physical traces left behind. This is clear every time she looks at her wrist.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Grustein reveal he is so set against the Nazis and is so horrified by the crimes they have committed?

Discussion Question 2

Though the war is now over, people are still suffering from the after-effects of the conflict, and the Nazis. How?



Discussion Question 3

Why does Christine sympathize with the Germans civilians who are marched through Dachau and forced to dig graves for dead prisoners? Is Christine justified in feeling this way? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

omen, persevered, provocation, emaciated, vibrant, vigorously, convulsing



Chapters 33 – 38

Summary

Chapter 33 – St. Michael's Church has miraculously remained standing despite being severely damaged during the war. The first service in five years is held in the partially-restored church. People flood the church. Stefan is among them. This angers Christine. She wonders what other SS members are hidden among the people. Prayers are said for the Jewish victims and their loved ones, and the minister urges those who know the truth to speak out. This prompts Christine to stand and expose Stefan. Many people in church defend Stefan, saying that Christine must either be confused or that everyone was forced to do things in wartime they didn't want to do. The minister and other members order Christine out of the church.

Chapter 34 – At home, Christine and her family discover that Maria has committed suicide. Christine reveals the truth about Maria's pregnancy. Christine feels as if she has failed her sister and that Maria's death was punishment for exposing Stefan. Christine's father goes missing at work the next day, and she tries to get a passing jeep of Americans to help, but they refuse to do so. She then goes to the American checkpoint down the road to seek out Jake. She sees Stefan with the Americans there, and tells them he is SS. Stefan says the Americans trust him as a translator. She then lunges at Stefan, but is restrained. Stefan reveals that he warned her he would make her pay, and that her father, under suspicion of war crimes, has been taken to Dachau by the Americans. On her way back, Christine runs into Jake who has learned some German.

Chapter 35 – Jake pays for Christine to travel to Dachau. She brings along her father's identity papers and assorted information. She is heavily conflicted about returning to Dachau. She is admitted when she shows the tattoo on her forearm, and she moves past numerous cages holding hundreds of SS prisoners. She meets with an American, Colonel Hensley, who takes down some information, and then another soldier comes to collect her.

Chapter 36 – Christine, put in a waiting room, is then stunned to see Isaac enter. Isaac explains he was shot, but survived, and hid in the woods. Isaac has been helping the Americans in translating and identifying former guards and officers in exchange for pay and a trip home when the trials are over. She tells Isaac everything that has happened, including how Stefan still has his black uniform. Isaac promises to help however he can. They go to see Hensley who says he has heard the same sob story hundreds of times, but can't do anything without proof. Christine explains she worked for Grustein, who has turned himself in and is cooperating. Grustein can identify Stefan. If the Americans will not go to get Stefan without proper proof, she will get Stefan to come to them.

Chapter 37 – Grustein, under the watchful eye of Christine, Isaac, and Hensley, writes to Stefan, asking him to help the SS members of the camp escape. Christine then secretly delivers the letter and waits impatiently at Dachau with Isaac. When Stefan



arrives, he is taken into custody and identified by Grustein. Isaac also reveals that Stefan is the guard who killed his father and proceeds to attack Stefan before being restrained.

Chapter 38 – Christine looks happily at the plum tree she planted before she and Isaac were sent to Dachau. She and Isaac are now married. Christine reveals she still has Isaac's lucky stone, and they have retrieved their tablecloth. Christine and Isaac then head in to have dinner with her family, including Dietrich, who has been freed.

Analysis

As the final section of the novel unfolds, Nazism, thematically, still has lingering effects on Hessental and its residents. This is true of the fanaticism of Stefan and his willingness to hurt however he can those that he must in order to survive. This is no guilt or remorse from Stefan for his part at Dachau but merely indifference and callousness.

The reader should also note here the scene in the church. While thousands of Christians were arrested, tortured, and murdered for their opposition to Nazism and their defense of Jews and others targeted by the Nazis, and while thousands of other Christians spoke out (such as the courageous Bishop of Stuttgart, who truly opened Grunstein's eyes), others have fallen silent in the face of unspeakable evil. This is true of the cowardly minister at Saint Michael's, who refuses to listen to anything Christine has to say about Stefan. Hypocritically, he offers up prayers for the dead but will do nothing to help the living –an air of survivalist indifference probably brought on by either fear of the Nazis, or by unspoken support of the Nazis. Either way, Nazism continues to heavily influence the lives of the people of Hessental. Much of the rise of Nazis and their perpetration of such heinous crimes had to do with people being unwilling to speak out, or unwilling or unable to listen. As conservative philosopher and English statesman Edmund Burke once said, "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

Christine's act of courage, occurring under God in Church, demonstrates the moral soundness of the stand she takes against Nazism and Stefan. At long last able to do something to make things right, she is stunned to see how, even with the Nazis out of power, the people of town are covering up the atrocities, hoping to bury them quickly. But for Christine, this is not enough, just as it was not enough for Grunstein.

Family also continues to heavily influence the life and actions of Christine late in the novel. She must face down the scene of the greatest nightmare place of her life. Dachau, a second time in order to save her father. It is clear that her love for and loyalty toward her family are absolutely unshakeable. Her courage and her strength are inspirational here. Moreover, she discovers that Isaac is still alive. Here, the theme of romantic love again becomes prominent, as Isaac does everything in his power to fight for Dietrich's freedom. Isaac understands that Christine's family is now also his own family, and with his immediate family gone, Isaac needs to see something good finally



come out of the horrors of Nazism. His love for Christine is best expressed in this instance, as he is willing to do everything that he can to secure Dietrich's release.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Christine feel the need to speak out against Stefan in church even though the war is over? Do you believe Christine is justified in having done so? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Despite Stefan's past, many Germans rally in support of him. Why? Can their decision to do so be understood? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Isaac go through such lengths to help secure Dietrich's freedom? Why are Isaac and Christine ultimately successful in getting Dietrich freed?

Vocabulary

primeval, ancient, carillon, scrutinized, diabolical, fraternization, equilibrium, tribunal



Characters

Christine Bolz

Christine Bolz is the main character of the novel “The Plum Tree” by Ellen Marie Wiseman. Blonde-haired, beautiful, and deeply compassionate, Christine is seventeen years old when the novel begins. A resident of the town of Hessental, Germany, she is the daughter of Dietrich and Rose Bolz, the granddaughter of Oma and Opa, and the older sister of Maria, Heinrich, and Karl. From a lower-class family, Christine and her mother work as domestic help for the wealthy Jewish family, the Bauermans. While working there, Christine falls in love with eldest child Isaac Bauerman, and the two begin seeing one another.

As Hitler and the Nazis grow in power and pass new laws against the Jews, Christine and Isaac continue their relationship in secret. Christine's courage and compassion are evident through her desire to remain with Isaac, even when it is against the law. They continue meeting weekly, then monthly, and then deciding not to meet at all until after everything is over. Christine is heartbroken by this. She wants nothing more than to be with Isaac.

When World War II breaks out, Christine and her family must endure rationing, Nazi policing, and Dietrich being drafted and sent to the Eastern Front. At the same time, Christine discovers in horror that Jews are being rounded up and taken to concentration camps. Isaac is taken to Dachau, and later transferred back to Hessental as part of a work detail. There, Christine attempts to help Isaac escape and hide. Her courage and love for Isaac are clearly manifested in this attempt. Nevertheless, Christine and Isaac are found out and sent to Dachau. At Dachau, Christine's wrist is tattooed with the number 11091986.

At Dachau, Christine becomes the cook for an SS officer named Grunstein, who opposes what is going on at Dachau. Christine herself experiences those horrors firsthand, and they deeply affect her. It is something that will forever scar her. Christine later believes Isaac has been killed by firing squad in the woods. The arrival of Americans who liberate the camp is thus bittersweet for Christine.

Back at home, Christine angrily discovers former SS soldiers like Stefan walking around free. Drawing on her experiences at the camp, which haunt her and make her even more courageous, she decides to make a stand. When she speaks out against them, the SS accuse her father of war crimes and turn him over to the Americans. He is then sent to Dachau. Christine then travels to Dachau to prove her father's innocence. There, she is amazed to discover that Isaac is still alive, and assisting the Americans. Working together, Christine and Isaac prove Dietrich's innocence, and have Stefan arrested. Christine and Isaac are then married.



Isaac Bauerman

Isaac Bauerman is a young man at university who appears to be in his late teens or early twenties when the novel begins. He is the son of wealthy parents and the older brother of Gabriella. Despite his wealth, Isaac is incredibly well-grounded and compassionate. Isaac falls in love with Christine early on. Due to his gentle nature, Isaac believes that the differences between he and Christine, specifically his being Jewish, don't matter, but Nazi-enacted laws forbid even contact between Germans and Jews.

Though Isaac is worried for Christine's safety, he agrees to continue secretly seeing her until it becomes too dangerous for this to happen at all. His primary concern here is Christine's life. It is a position he maintains throughout the novel.

Soon after, Isaac and his family are rounded up and taken to Dachau. Both his parents and his sister are killed there before long. Isaac later becomes part of a work detail that returns to his hometown to militarize a nearby airfield. Christine attempts to help Isaac escape, but in the end, both are captured and sent to Dachau. Isaac reminds Christine to play on the fact that she is German when she gets to the camp, which earns her a spot as a cook instead of a regular prisoner.

Isaac himself is rounded up with a number of other prisoners to dig a mass grave, after which time they are shot and buried. Isaac, only wounded, manages to free himself. Angered and haunted by everything that has happened to his family, and to millions of others, Isaac goes to work for the Americans, translating and identifying SS officers and guards. Isaac is later thrilled to see Christine again and becomes her steadfast ally in proving her father's innocence and arresting Stefan, who personally killed Isaac's father. By the end of the novel, Christine and Isaac marry.

Maria Bolz

Maria Bolz is the younger sister of Christine, the daughter of Dietrich and Rose Bolz, the granddaughter of Oma and Opa, and the older sister of Heinrich and Karl. Maria is a sweet, gentle girl who lovingly supports her family and encourages her sister. When the war gets underway, Maria endures many hardships with her family, always finding ways to be supportive and kind. She is drafted into the Nazi civil service, where she is appointed to perform various tasks, such as digging trenches for troops. As the war winds down and Russian troops enter the area where Maria and her female crew are digging, they are savagely and repeatedly raped by the Russians. Maria is hollowed out by this experience and believes no man will ever want to marry her after what she has been through. When she learns she is pregnant, she commits suicide.



Rose Bolz

Rose Bolz is the mother of Christine, Maria, Heinrich, and Karl, is married to Dietrich, and is the daughter-in-law of Oma and Opa. Rose is a strong but gentle woman who cares deeply for her family, and works as a domestic for the Bauermans with Christine. Rose does not approve of Christine's love for Isaac, not because he is Jewish, but because the laws make contact between them illegal and punishable by imprisonment. When the war begins, Rose continues to support her family and does her best to keep them together and preoccupied. She is terrified when Dietrich is drafted and sent to the Eastern Front and is later horrified when Christine and Isaac are sent to Dachau. She is grateful and thrilled when Christine and Isaac return safe.

Dietrich Bolz

Dietrich Bolz is the father of Christine, Maria, Heinrich, and Karl, is the husband of Rose, and is the son of Oma and Opa. Dietrich is a kind, traditional man who works as a stonemason, though work is difficult to find. Dietrich, a conservative, opposes the Nazis and resents their policies. He is drafted into the Sixth German Army, fights on the Eastern Front, and manages to escape to home when the Sixth surrenders. He reveals to his family that most people fighting on the front do not believe in Hitler or Nazism and are on the front merely because they have been drafted. After the war, when Christine accuses Stefan of war crimes, former SS members falsely accuse Dietrich of war crimes, and he is sent to Dachau to await trial by the Americans. He is ultimately saved when Christine and Isaac prove his innocence.

Nina Bauerman

Nina Bauerman is the mother of Isaac and Gabriella Bauerman. She is incredibly gentle, generous, and caring, and pays Rose and Christine very well for their work. Nina is enchanted by the romance between her son and Christine but is terrified when the Nuremberg Laws are passed. Nina and her family are ultimately rounded up and sent to Dachau. There, Nina dies of typhus.

Grunstein

Grunstein is a mid-level SS officer who serves against his will at Dachau. Having opposed many of the policies and tactics of the Nazis early on, Grunstein was thrown out of the Nazi Party. After conversing with the Bishop of Stuttgart, who pointed out the increasing atrocities of the Nazis, and after Grunstein's own mentally-ill sister is exterminated by the Nazis, Grunstein joins the SS. There, he collects information and intends to serve as a witness against the barbarity of the Nazis. He spreads news of their horrors to everyone he can, including foreign diplomats. Grunstein accepts Christine as a cook and confides his personal story in her. After the war, he helps to free



Christine's father and arrest Stefan, and he provides valuable information to the Americans about SS and Nazi war crimes.

Kate

Kate is Christine's best friend early in the novel. The two, however, begin to drift apart when Kate falls in love with Stefan, whose radical Nazism influences and infects Kate. Kate, both poisoned in mind by Stefan's hatred and fueled by her love of Stefan, turns against Christine by the end of the novel.

Stefan Eichmann

Stefan Eichmann is a young man who is a fanatical member of the SS and an ardent supporter of the Nazi Party. Stefan is Kate's fiancée. He is cruel and manipulative and works with glee as a guard at Dachau, where he personally executes Isaac's father. Stefan is later outed for his crimes by Christine, after which he falsely accuses Dietrich of war crimes. Stefan is later tricked into coming to Dachau pending an escape plan for the SS members being held prisoner. There, he is identified by Grunstein and Isaac, the latter of whom beats Stefan into a bloody pulp. Stefan is arrested and imprisoned. Stefan is a truly villainous character who does not change through the course of the novel. Even through his arrest, he is cruel, manipulative, and racist.

Adolf Hitler

Adolf Hitler is the leader of the Nazi Party and rules Nazi Germany with an iron fist. He is a terrifying and evil human being who plunges Germany into racism, bigotry, and war. He oversees the implementation of the Nuremberg Laws and the concentration camps and delights in declaring war against all of Europe and America. Hitler appears at a rally in Hesselton where he meets Christine, encouraging her to become a part of the Lebensborn program. Christine is sickened by this. Years later, with the war lost, Hitler commits suicide before the Allies close in on him.



Symbols and Symbolism

Lucky Rock

Isaac carries a lucky rock through the early part of the novel. It comprises a small stone with a snail fossil imprinted into it. When he and Christine must see each other less, and then not at all, Isaac gives Christine the lucky rock to hold onto. It is a small piece of Isaac that Christine is able to carry about constantly. It serves as a physical reminder of his love for her.

Tablecloth

A tablecloth is used by Christine and Isaac to burn their initials, and the date, into, during a secret meeting in a communal business cellar after they have decided to one day be married. They hide the tablecloth, and determine that it will be used at their wedding. When the novel ends, Christine retrieves the tablecloth, and it is intended that it will now be used at their wedding reception.

The Nuremburg Laws

The Nuremburg Laws are a series of vile, racial laws passed by Hitler and the Nazi Party in Germany in the 1930s. These cruel laws forbid, among other things, Jews from shopping, owning businesses, or even having contact with non-Jews. These laws provide a legal obstacle to Christine and Isaac's relationship and demonstrate the virulent racism of the Nazis. The laws are among the things that intimidate good German people into fearful submission to the Nazis.

Ration Cards

Ration cards are distributed by the German authorities to civilians during the war. Ration cards limit what purchases may be made by German civilians, including food. These ration cards must also be presented to the seller in order to purchase a product. These limit the consumption of the German population so that the majority of what the country produces is directed to the war effort. Later in the war, flyers are distributed with the ration cards detailing the horrors committed on ethnic German civilians by the Russians, including rapes and murders. The ration cards are a physical daily reminder of the hardships the German people are faced with during the war.

Food

Food is in short supply during World War II for German civilians. Most of what food is produced and sold in Germany during the war is heavily rationed for civilians, with most



of the food going to feed the millions of soldiers under arms at the front. As a result of this, many German civilians tend to vegetable gardens and illegal hunting in order to feed themselves and their families. The shortages of food faced by the German people are among the numerous hardships that they endure as a result of the Nazis.

Tapestry

A tapestry –a large, woven, carpet-like illustrated scene –is purchased by Dietrich and Rose Bolz not long after they marry. It is proudly displayed in their house. When things get desperate during the war, Rose trades the tapestry to Frau Klause for a rooster. She is more content to feed her family than hold onto something physical from the past if it means her family will be fed.

Gasoline and Oil

Gasoline and oil are heavily rationed by the Germans during World War II. The amount of gasoline and oil the German people are restricted to use is so minimal that they can barely afford to heat their homes in the winters, or heat water for bathing. Most of the gasoline and oil produced in Germany, or imported from elsewhere, is directed for use by the German military in conducting the war effort. Gasoline shortages are among the many hardships that befall the German people.

Number Tattoos

Number tattoos are inked onto the wrists and upper arms of people sent to concentration camps. These numbers are meant to deprive the people of their individual identity as human beings, and relegate them to a mere number by which they can be kept track of. Christine learns that Isaac has been stamped with the number 1071504, while she herself is stamped with 11091986. She later uses this tattoo to gain access to Dachau to save the life of her father.

Gray-and-white-striped Uniforms

Gray-and-white-striped uniforms are worn by the people condemned to the concentration camps. They are prison-like uniforms meant to deprive people of their humanity. They are no better than rags in most cases, and afford little protection and comfort against the elements. The uniforms are forced on the prisoners, who must wear them without underwear.

The Plum Tree

The plum tree is planted by Christine just prior to her arrest and sentencing to Dachau. It is a symbol of hope and promise for the future. Miraculously, the tree survives a bitter

winter, just as Christine survives her internment at Dachau. Returning home, Christine is thrilled to see the tree is still alive, healthy and growing. In the same way, the reader is glad to see that Christine returns home, and thrives again.



Settings

Hessental

Hessental is Christine and Isaac's hometown. Located in the Kocher River Valley in Germany, Hessental is a storybook village nestled between the forests of two mountains. To Christine, Hessental, and the valley, are heaven on Earth. However, this changes when Hitler and the Nazis pass the Nuremberg Laws, and the village is plastered by vile propaganda posters, and posters outlining the new laws. Nazi thugs appear to enforce order in the village, and the area later comes under military control as a plane-building operation is moved to the valley. Soon after, the Allies begin bombing the nearby airfield, and Hessental. By the end of the novel, more than half the village has been destroyed, and over four hundred people have been killed.

The Kocher River Valley

The Kocher River Valley is located in southern Germany and is traversed by the Kocher River. Surrounded on either side by forested mountains, the valley is also home to numerous small towns and villages, like Hessental. The valley is also home to a small civilian airfield. When the war gets underway, the German military takes control of the valley, moving a plane-building operation to the area, and militarizing and expanding the airfield. As a result, the Kocher River Valley becomes a prime target for Allied bombing raids.

Dachau

Dachau is an infamous concentration camp run by the SS in southern Germany. Dachau is originally constructed as a forced labor camp, but soon after also becomes an extermination camp as well. Tens of thousands of innocent people, many of them Jews, are imprisoned and executed at Dachau. Isaac and his family become inmates at Dachau, with Isaac's entire family being killed there. Christine is later imprisoned at Dachau, where she comes to work as a cook for Grustein. Grustein explains that Dachau is such a horrific place that many guards would rather risk death on the Eastern Front against the Russians than be a party to murder at Dachau. Dachau is ultimately liberated by the Americans, and becomes a source of nightmares for Christine. Christine must later return to Dachau to free her father with Isaac.

Stuttgart

Stuttgart is a city in Southern Germany that has deep roots in Christianity. There, the Bishop of Stuttgart is horrified to see what the Nazis are doing to thousands upon thousands of innocent people, and speaks out against the atrocities. Among those whom the Bishop gets through to is Grustein, whose eyes are truly opened by the



Bishop. Grustein later infiltrates the SS to serve as a witness against them and leaves Stuttgart for Dachau when he does so.

The Eastern Front

The Eastern Front is a theater of the Second World War in which the principal adversaries are Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia. The Eastern Front of operations begins in June, 1941, with the German invasion of Russia. The Germans are ultimately stopped at a number of cities during the winter, after which time the Russians launch a series of counterattacks that continue to push the Germans back. The Russian target is Berlin. The Eastern Front is notorious for being especially brutal in the way the Germans and Russians fight one another and treat one another's civilians. As the Eastern Front continues to move closer to Germany, Russian soldiers commit no shortage of crimes against innocent German civilians, including Maria, who is gang-raped repeatedly.



Themes and Motifs

Family

Family is an important theme in the novel “The Plum Tree” by Ellen Marie Wiseman. Family, thematically, involves the mutual love, loyalty, compassion, and emotional, physical, and even spiritual support between individuals who may or may not be blood-related but who still act in accord with the traditional family unit. In the novel, family appears as both an incredibly important and positive thing and influences the novel in many important ways.

Family is a beautiful and wonderful thing for Christine as the novel begins. She loves her family dearly and is especially close with her mother and sister. Her mother is more a role model than merely a mother, and her sister is more a best friend than merely a sister. Christine trusts both of them implicitly, and both know of Christine’s feelings for Isaac as the novel unfolds. Christine likewise lovingly cares for her younger brothers, her grandparents, and her father.

The war will challenge and test everything when it comes to Christine and her family. Her father is drafted into service for the Germany army, and her grandfather is later killed trying to stop the barn fire from spreading to the house. With both of them gone, Christine, Maria, and their mother have even more work in caring for the remaining members of their family, but they do so without complaining, for they deeply value what they have and deeply miss those whom they have lost. Later in the novel, only the depth of the horrors that Christine has faced can enable her to understand the kind of suffering Maria is going through after so many repeated rapes on the Russian front, though in the end, Christine is sadly unable to save Maria.

When Isaac is found in the attic by the SS, Christine immediately surrenders herself in order to protect her family. She cannot imagine any harm coming to them, and so essentially sacrifices herself to the Germans and is arrested. Later, when she is released from Dachau, she willingly returns out of love for her father to make sure he is freed rather than tried as war criminal. Her love is clear and resounding as she returns to what has been hell on Earth for her in order to save her father’s life.

It is also before and while she is imprisoned at Dachau that Christine also learns what effects Nazism and the war have taken on other families as well. Many of the sons of the families in the village have been killed while off at war. Many more families are destroyed by the Allied bombing raids. At Dachau, entire families disappear altogether and others, very nearly. Isaac’s entire family is butchered at Dachau. Hanna’s family, too, is massacred at Dachau. The knowledge of these horrors only underscores Christine’s love for her own family and helps resolve in Isaac’s mind why it is so important to save Christine’s father, who will soon become his father-in-law.



Nazism

Nazism is an important theme in the novel “The Plum Tree” by Ellen Marie Wiseman, and heavily influences all of the events of the novel. Nazism is a German-founded political ideology and system which is ultra-nationalistic, virulently and violently racist against peoples deemed inferior (such as Jews), is highly militaristic, and is totalitarian in nature, managing even the smallest details of everyday life for people under its control. Nazism is an utterly evil and sadistic political system, readily conveyed in the events of the novel.

When the novel begins, things are really beginning to get bad for people classified as inferior. A legal code, the Nuremberg Laws, are passed, making it illegal for people to have any kind of contact with Jews and making it illegal for Jews to do things like work. These laws make it impossible for Christine and Isaac to get married, and Christine wonders how such horrible people could have gotten into power in the first place.

Christine’s grandparents reveal how. Germany, in the throes of Depression and desperate times, look for quick and desperate answers. Hitler and his Nazi Party gain power by promising an end to poverty and disharmony, and to restore the glory of Germany. As they grow in power, they also blame the ills suffered by German people on those considered inferior, such as Jews, the mentally-ill, the devoutly Christian and Catholic, socialists, Gypsies, and a host of others. Many people buy into this vitriol. Many others remain silent out of fear. Many others willfully turn a blind eye to the horrors that continue to build. Others are afraid to speak out.

The totalitarian nature of Nazism also affects the everyday life of people. Citizens spy against one another while SS thugs patrol the streets. People deemed inferior are rounded up. Concentration camps are constructed to exterminate entire races of people declared inferior. Horrible people like Stefan are appointed to guard such places. The Nazis take away the private radios of families and replace them with state-approved models that only turn into two stations, both controlled by the Nazis. Breeding programs like the Lebensborn operation are put into effect.

It isn’t long before the military intentions of Nazism are made apparent. Hitler begins taking over territory he claims traditionally belongs to Germany--including Austria and parts of Czechoslovakia--and then declares war on Poland, which initiates the Second World War as France and Great Britain enter the conflict in defense of Poland.

However, not everyone is thrilled with the effects of Nazism. Christine and her mother leave out food for nearby prisoners as they pass by the church in town. Many other villagers later do the same. Christine’s own father is not a Nazi and does not support the war effort, yet he is still conscripted and sent away to the front. When he returns home, he reveals that many of the soldiers fighting on the front are doing so only because they have been forced to do so. Christine later learns that even guards and officers at Dachau, like Grustein, are disgusted with Nazism and its effects.



Even after the war, Nazism has a perverse effect on people. Rather than scourging it from their collective consciousness and holding criminals to account, most people would rather quickly bury and forget the past. Christine is one person who refuses to let the past be buried, and so she bravely speaks out.

War

War is an important theme in the novel "The Plum Tree" by Ellen Marie Wiseman. War--sustained combat between two or more participant countries or groups--appears in the novel in the form of World War II. War, thematically, influences the plot in tremendous ways, some positive, but mostly negative.

World War II is inaugurated on September 1, 1939, when Hitler orders the invasion of Poland. Soon after, Germany is at war with France and Great Britain as well. Numerous other countries commit to enter the war and fight against Germany, including Russia. In late 1941, the United States enters World War II as well.

The effects on the German population are immediate. Food, water, gasoline, and other resources are heavily rationed so the majority may be sent to support the war effort. German troops arrive in town to secure every scrap of iron and other metals they can find in order to turn them into war machinery. This includes, ironically, nearly all of the church bells in town, objects originally designed to symbolize peace and unity which are now to be used in war and destruction.

Allied bombing raids commence shortly thereafter. Cities and villages alike across Germany are targeted as the Germans shift around their bases of operations, intentionally and cowardly embedding themselves among civilians. Christine's village is bombed, and by the end of the war, more than half of the village is rubble, with some four hundred people dead. Numerous others have died fighting at the front, such as Farmer Erkert's only two sons.

Many Germans are forcibly drafted against their will in the German army to fight on various fronts. Christine's own father is drafted and sent to fight on the Eastern Front in war he doesn't believe in. Rather than admit to mistakes made in strategy, Hitler abandons entire units, including the entire Sixth Army, to the Russians, resulting in countless deaths.

Ethnic Germans in Russia and Ukraine, as well as citizens in Germany, proper, are not spared the wrath of the advancing Russians. Civilians are brutally massacred, and women and young girls are viciously raped. No distinction is made between Nazis and Nazi opponents. Among those repeatedly raped is Maria, a trauma that ultimately leads to her suicide. Thousands of other German girls and women do the same rather than live with the shame of being so cruelly treated.

After the war, Germany is divided into zones of occupation between the Americans, British, French, and Russians. The French and the Russians are known for cruel



reprisals, but the Americans and British mainly handle themselves with decency. Christine and her family are grateful to be in the American sector after the war.

Love

Love is an important theme in the novel “The Plum Tree” by Ellen Marie Wiseman. Love in the novel is of a romantic nature, and occurs primarily between Christine and Isaac. The romantic love that occurs between them is hugely instrumental in the conduct of their lives. Early in the novel, Maria contends that love conquers all, and by the end of the novel, for Christine and Isaac, that is certainly true.

When the novel begins in 1938, Christine and Isaac have just fallen in love and have decided they want to be married. Their relationship is gentle and old-fashioned, and their love is strong enough to make the differences between them--she a poor Christian and he a wealthy Jew--irrelevant. However, their love is not enough to counter the Nuremburg Laws, which ultimately forbid contact between Jews and non-Jews.

Christine is horrified by these laws, but she and Isaac continue seeing one another in secret weekly and then monthly as things get worse in Germany for Jews. Eventually, it becomes too dangerous for them to see one another anymore, so they decide to wait out the storm, pledging their love to one another in parting. Christine only sees Isaac once more before he is carted off to Dachau and does not know what becomes of him until Isaac is stationed in town with a work detail.

When Isaac escapes at Christine’s insistence, she hides him first in the family’s henhouse and then the attic. She cares for him, brings him food, and does all that she can to make sure he is comfortable, despite the obvious risk she is taking. Her love is far stronger than her fear, and it clearly shows.

When Isaac is found, rather than bear the thought of losing him again, or allowing harm to come to her family, Christine surrenders to the Germans, who send both her and Isaac to Dachau. There, Isaac and Christine are separated from one another and see each other only a handful of times. Christine ultimately believes that Isaac has been killed just one day before the Americans liberate the camp.

When the novel ends, Isaac’s love for Christine is telling. When she learns he is still alive, she is elated. Isaac becomes Christine’s strongest ally in the struggle to free Dietrich from prison. Isaac does everything he can to help make it happen, and he and Christine are ultimately successful. In the end, they are happily married and do their best to start their lives all over again.

Resilience

Resilience is an important theme in the novel “The Plum Tree” by Ellen Marie Wiseman. Resilience is the ability for an individual to deal with and/or overcome circumstances beyond his or her control. In the novel, Christine, Isaac, Rose, Maria, and others



demonstrate incredible resilience time and time again against the forces of Nazism and war, which constantly bear down on their lives.

When the Nuremberg Laws forbid Christine and Isaac from having any contact with one another, they demonstrate resilience by secretly meeting once a week, then meeting once a month, then ultimately deciding to postpone their meetings altogether until a better time is at hand. Even then they are resilient, relying on their love for one another to sustain them through such a dark time.

The severe rationing of food and other resources means that German families have less. Christine, Rose, Maria, and their family work in the gardens to make up for the shortages, demonstrating resilience against forces beyond their control. Christmas, rather than being a sad time, is instead a glad occasion as handmade gifts replace store-bought goods. Here, the family demonstrates resilience by adapting to the changing times and focusing on what is truly important: each other.

When Isaac escapes from his work detail, he tells Christine he has survived by focusing his thoughts on her. Christine, too, tells Isaac this is also the case for her. They both demonstrate their resilience in dealing with such difficult circumstances by focusing on their love that also sees them through Dachau. It also leads to their marriage, in spite of Nazism and the war, at the end of the novel.

As the war ends, and people try to bury the past quickly to forget it, Christine refuses to fall in line, determined instead to exorcise the past. She demonstrates not only great resilience, but great courage in going against the grain and outing Stefan as an SS war criminal. Even when much of the village turns against her, Christine will not let the past go. With the help of Isaac, Grustein, and the Americans, Christine sees to Stefan's arrest and imprisonment.

Unfortunately, there is one place in the novel where resilience does not ultimately win the day. Maria, repeatedly and brutally gang-raped by vicious Russian soldiers, cannot live with the shame of what has happened to her. She believes no man will ever want to touch her after what she has been through and especially after she learns she is pregnant. In the end, the war's effects are too much for her to overcome, and she commits suicide.



Styles

Point of View

Ellen Marie Wiseman tells her novel “The Plum Tree” from the third-person limited-omniscient point of view. The third-person narrative mode allows the reader to follow along in Christine’s story as she moves from a girl of seventeen to a young woman of twenty-four, skipping days and sometimes months at a time in order to progress the story. This also allows the author to insert important historical contextual information, especially when it comes to the Nazis. The limited-omniscient aspect of the narration lends both drama and suspense to the story and underscores the reality of not truly knowing much during war. For Christine, she is completely unaware of whether her father has died fighting at the front or whether Isaac has died at Dachau. This also lends an air of believability and realism to the novel, demonstrating that no person can truly know everything going on at once.

Language and Meaning

Ellen Marie Wiseman write her novel “The Plum Tree” in language that is simple, straightforward, and peppered with common German phrases and words. This is done for at least three reasons. First, the novel’s target audience includes young adults and new adults, and the simple and straightforward language is reflective of the level of education these groups of people have had. Second, the novel recounts the experiences of a seventeen year-old girl through her twenty-fourth year during wartime, and so the language employed is reflective of both her age, and the extent of her education. Third, because the novel takes place in Germany, the author has included common German phrases and words, such as “nein” for “no,” “bitte” for “please,” and “danke” for “thank you.” This lends a sense of authenticity to the German setting of the novel and the characterization of Christine as a German civilian.

Structure

Ellen Marie Wiseman divides her novel “The Plum Tree” into thirty-eight consecutive, chronological, linear and numbered chapters which span the years from the autumn of 1938 to the summer of 1945. The novel spans the life of main character and principal protagonist, Christine, from her seventeenth year to the age of twenty-four. This simple and straightforward structure to the novel allows the reader to focus on the plot and all of its complexities, from the love between Christine and Isaac to the Germans who oppose the Nazis to the extent of the evils of Nazism. The linear and chronological nature of the structure also allow the reader to easily progress through time, sometimes in terms of days, other times in terms of months. Each chapter therein deals with a specific incident, or set of circumstances. For example, Chapter 11 deals with the

beginning of the Allied air campaign against German ground targets, while Chapter 33 deals with Christine's speaking out against Stefan in church.



Quotes

But we're from two different worlds.
-- Christine (Chapter 1 paragraph 44)

Importance: At the beginning of the novel, seventeen year-old Christine wonders if she and Isaac can ever truly be together since they come from different worlds. Christine is a working-class Christian while Isaac is a wealthy Jew. Isaac assures her that these are differences easy to overcome, though it will not be so easy as far as the Nazis are concerned.

The only thing I want is to be your wife.
-- Christine (Chapter 5 paragraph 42)

Importance: The Nuremburg Laws make life difficult on Jews, forbidding them from even working and shopping. Isaac worries how he will ever be able to support Christine or make her happy, but Christine says that all she truly wants out of life is to be Isaac's wife.

Fear had become a part of who they were, and it showed in their hunched shoulders and hurried pace.
-- Narrator (Chapter 12 paragraph 1)

Importance: As Allied bombing raids become commonplace, and as the SS and Gestapo thugs step up their brutal tactics, fear becomes second-nature to each of the villagers in Hesselental. The fear is so encompassing that it literally manifests itself physically in how villagers walk around and carry themselves. This reveals the tremendous stress and terrible time German civilians have during the war.

Something's happening.
-- Frau Unger (Chapter 14 paragraph 4)

Importance: As Jews and other people the Nazis deem inferior begin to disappear from the village, rumors abound about what might be happening to them. The darkest rumors hint at mass executions. Frau Unger here chillingly sums up that, whatever is going on, something is indeed happening.

How will we live without ourselves if we do nothing?
-- Christine (Chapter 16 paragraph 26)

Importance: Here, Christine determines that she will secretly leave food for the work camp detail as they pass by the church. Christine knows those people need food, and it is the most she can do under the present circumstances. Given a chance to help them, Christine doesn't understand how she could possibly avoid helping them.



I'm still here. But I shouldn't be. I'm putting you and your entire family in danger.
-- Isaac (Chapter 17 paragraph 6)

Importance: Isaac, though grateful for being hidden in Christine's attic, knows he has put her, and her entire family, at an incredible risk. He determines that he will leave, sooner or later, because he cannot stomach the thought of any harm coming to Christine or her family.

We're missing a prisoner from the work camp," the Gruppenfuhrer bellowed. "We're searching all houses and barns in the village."
-- The Gruppenfuhrer (Chapter 19 paragraph 9)

Importance: When Isaac's escape is noticed, the SS responds. The storm through the village, searching everywhere. Here, they explain to Christine and her mother that they will be searching their home and outbuildings, and Christine and her family are not to interfere or face arrest. Here, the sheer cruelty and brutality of the Nazis is on clear display.

The only thing I can do is keep going. If Isaac and I think we can get away safely, so be it. If not, then we'll wait for things to change. They have to change. For the better or worse, they always do.
-- Christine (Chapter 20 paragraph 7)

Importance: Here, Christine reflects on the need for her and Isaac to flee for the safety of her family. They will at least attempt to get away. However, they know that they can never truly be free in their homeland of Germany provided the Nazis are still in power. Christine strikes a hopeful note that, sooner or later, the darkness must end.

Soon, everything was coated with a thin layer of fine ash, and as the ground thawed, the remains merged with the soil beneath their feet. The ground would never be the same. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, the earth would take back the dead... and the earth would never forget.
-- Narrator (Chapter 26 paragraph 3)

Importance: At Dachau, Christine witnesses the ashes of cremated bodies coating everything like snow. The ash is all the remains of human beings tortured, executed, and burned by the Nazis, and their ash will become intermixed with the soil. The Nazis hope this will bury the past, but Christine knows that this will mean the dead will be remembered, and the ground made hallow.

And now, with the knowledge that evil men like Stefan still roamed free, it felt as though the events she was trying so hard to put behind her would never end.
-- Narrator (Chapter 32 paragraph 4)

Importance: After the war, Christine is horrified that men like Stefan still roam around free despite the evil they have committed. However, Christine is not about to settle for

letting criminals walk free. Seeing Stefan moving about without a care in the world motivates her to seek out a way to redress the problem.