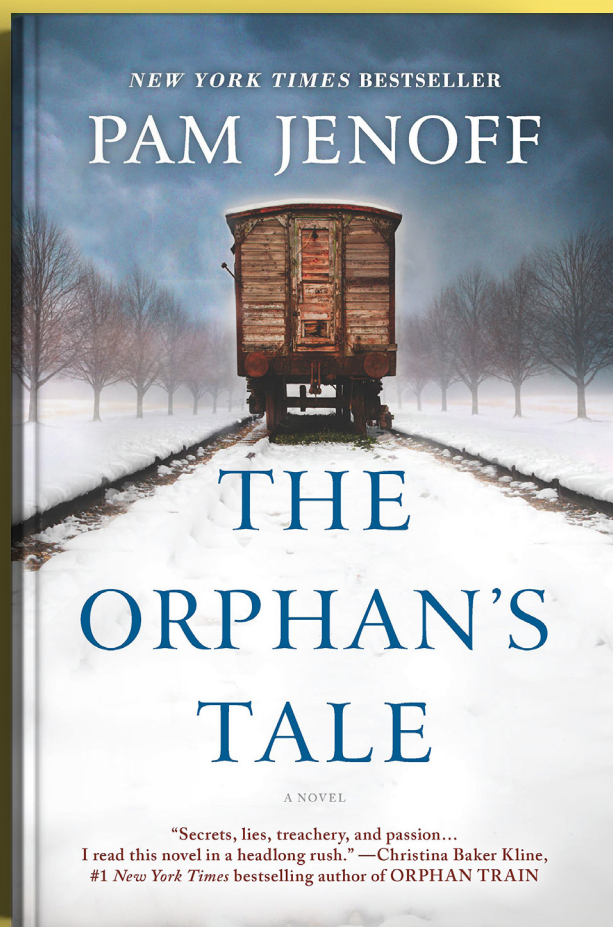


# JBC Book Clubs Discussion Guide

Created in partnership with MIRA Books  
Jewishbookcouncil.org



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# History of the Circus

Though the exact origins of the circus are debated—some believe the circus to have originated back in ancient Rome, while others contend that the only commonality with between them is the name, which refers to the circular shape of the performance space—the founding of the modern circus is credited to Phillip Astley, who opened the first circus in London in 1768. Astley was a retired military man who had developed a talent for equestrian trick-riding, and opened a facility to teach riders in the morning and perform in the afternoon. His building featured a circular arena, an idea that had been used in trick-riding in the past, which he called a circus (later it became the ring, but the name “circus” stuck for the show in its entirety).

After two years, Astley closed the riding school to focus on the performances. To keep the shows from getting stale, he began adding new acts—like jugglers, acrobats, and clowns—to intersperse between the equestrian displays. And so began what we know of as the circus.

The shows gained in popularity, and Astley opened a show in Paris in 1782. Around that time, one of Astley’s former performers opened a competing circus in London, and soon there were circuses major cities across Europe. In 1793, a performer from the rival circus, John Bill Ricketts, brought a circus to North America.

Within a few years, there were permanent circuses in the most major cities in North America. However, with American expansion west and few cities large enough to sustain a permanent circus show, the traveling circus was born. As a traveling show, the

large buildings that housed European performances were not practical, and in 1825, the canvas tent was introduced.

American circuses, like those run by P.T. Barnum, continued to grow and add to the circus format. Additions such as the sideshow, menageries, and multiple rings were developed by American circus owners, as well as the practice of traveling by rail.

With these innovations, “the unique character of the American circus emerged: It was a traveling tent-show coupled with a menagerie and run by businessmen, a very different model from that of European circuses, which for the most part remained under the control of performing families.”

Additional Information: [Circopedia](#)

## **Jews in the Circus**

Included among the European performing families were a number of Jewish families, some with their own circuses. The most famous of these were the Circus Blumenfeld, Circus Lorch, and Circus Strassburger.

While the more famous non-Jewish circuses eventually set up permanent homes, particularly in Germany, the Jewish circuses tended to remain as traveling acts. These circuses, some of which dated back as much as 200 years, ended in the 1930s in the face of the economic crises and the Nazi regime. Many of the members of these circus families were killed by the Nazis during the Holocaust.

## **Circus during World War II**

The circus as an institution held a prominent place within German entertainment, and, although Jews were banned from performing, circuses were allowed to continue well into World War II. The Nazis felt that that circus, unlike other forms of theater, was not subversive. Plus it provided levity and boosts to morale for German citizens.

As the Nazi regime came into power, the Jewish circuses were banned and employing Jewish performers was no longer allowed. While many circuses joined the Nazi party to avoid any difficulties, there were a number of circuses that did continue to employ Jews. This afforded Jewish performers some level of protection and often gave them a means of escaping Germany as the circus toured.

### **Alfred and Maria Althoff**

For many, the bonds of *Zirkus Volk* (circus people) transcended those of religion or nationality, which led to acts of bravery and kindness on behalf of Jews. Adolf\* and Maria Althoff exemplified this, and later received Israel's high honor of being named a Righteous Among the Nations.

While reports differ about the number of Jews hidden or assisted by the Althoff circus, it is certain that they hid Irene Danner, her mother, and her sister (members of the Lorch family). Irene was an acrobat who received performed with the Althoff circus under a false name (with false papers that the Althoffs arranged). When the Gestapo came to inspect, Irene—who married a Gentile performer from the circus, Peter Bento—and her family were warned to “go fishing.”

Note: Adolf Althoff is the inspiration for the character of Herr Neuhoff.

# JBC Book Clubs Discussion Questions

Note: The questions here are intended as a supplement to those that appear in the back of the book. Additionally, the questions below do contain spoilers!

1. The majority of characters in this story, if not Jews themselves, are, in some way, what we now call “righteous gentiles.” How does this affect the tone of the story? Why do you think the author made that choice?
2. Why do you think Astrid is against Herr Neuhoff taking Noa in, when she herself is being sheltered by the circus (p. 51)?
3. Why won’t Astrid speak to Peter about his act, even as it jeopardizes her own safety? Why does Peter insist on performing an act that he knows could put himself, the circus, and those who are hiding there in danger?
4. Astrid muses that Theo calling Noa “Mama” seemed like a betrayal to the mother from whom he was stolen (p. 157). How do you reconcile that with Astrid’s role at the end of the book? Do you feel that Astrid also being Jewish changes the situation in any way?
5. What is the significance of Astrid singing her childhood lullabies to Theo (p. 157, and see Related Media below for the words to “Raisins and Almonds”)? Do you think those two songs were chosen for particular reasons?
6. The clockmaker tells Astrid, “We cannot change who we are. Sooner or later we will all have to face ourselves” (p. 159). What do you think he meant by that? How does that statement apply to other characters in the book? Do you think Metz ends up “facing himself” or not?
7. Astrid’s choice to marry Erich was unusual and myopic. Given what we know about Astrid, why do you think she left her family’s circus to marry him? What do you think about Erich? Does he redeem himself in the end?
8. Initially, Noa is interested in having her fortune read by Drina, telling Astrid, “I like the promise of the unknown, of what might be out there” (p. 147). By the end of the novel, she has changed her mind, saying that she no longer wants to see the future (p. 275). What has changed? Do you think it is better to have the promise of the unknown?
9. What is the line between bravery and foolhardiness? Of the many daring acts committed by the characters in this book, which do you think are brave and which are reckless and foolish? How do you determine which are which?
10. When Herr Neuhoff offers Astrid a place at the circus, his response to her reminder of the danger—like that of the real Herr Althoff upon whom the character is based—is that she’s “Zirkus Volk” (p. 33). Why do you think circus affiliation trumps everything else?
11. Who is the orphan in the title? Whose story is this?

# Circus Trail Mix: Caramel Popcorn and Boiled Peanuts

Keep the circus in mind with treats that would be served at the fairgrounds. Plus, the salty-sweet, crunchy-soft mix mirrors Astrid and Noa and their relationship.

## Ingredients

6 cups of plain popped popcorn  
1/4 cup butter  
1/2 cup brown sugar  
2 tbsp. of light corn syrup  
1/2 tsp. vanilla  
1/4 tsp. kosher salt  
1/8 tsp. baking soda  
1 lb unshelled peanuts (as fresh or “green” as possible)  
3 tbsp. kosher salt  
1 quart of water

## Make the Popcorn

Line rimmed baking sheets with parchment paper. Spread your popped popcorn on the sheets in an even layer.

In a medium saucepan, add butter, brown sugar, corn syrup, and salt. Heat until butter has melted, stir, then bring to a boil.

Allow to boil for 4 minutes, then turn off the heat and add in the baking soda (which will make it fizz) and vanilla. Stir until the sauce is glossy.

Drizzle caramel over the popcorn, stirring to coat. Break up large clumps with a spoon. Allow to cool.

## Make the Peanuts:

Rinse the peanuts in cold water .

Combine the salt, water, and peanuts in a large pot. Bring the water to a low boil, cover and continue cooking at a low boil for 2-3 hours, until desired texture.

Allow peanuts to cool, and shell them.

Toss peanuts with caramel popcorn in a large bowl and enjoy!

# Cotton Candy Pops

## **Ingredients**

1 bag of cotton candy

1 box of pretzel sticks

Form the cotton candy into small balls, taking care not to flatten it too much.

Dip the tip of a pretzel stick in water, and then insert it into a cotton candy ball. Repeat, until all of your pops are made.

# Big Top Daiquiris

Courtesy of VinePair

Serves 4

## **Ingredients**

8 oz. White Rum

4 oz. Fresh Ruby Red Grapefruit juice

2 oz. Freshly squeezed lime juice

1 oz. Maraschino liqueur

Grapefruit wedges for garnish



# Recommended Reads and Related Media

## Historical Information About Jews in the Circus

[The Lorch Family](#)

Jewish Currents: [The Mistress of the Circus](#)

[Circus Williams](#)

[Circus Blumenfeld: Overview and General History](#)

[A Brief History of the Circus in Germany](#)

## Articles on Adolf Althoff

[How the Circus Saved a Jewish Family](#)

[The Jewish Foundation for the Righteous](#)

Yad Vashem: [Adolf and Maria Althoff](#)

New York Times: [Adolf Althoff, 85, Circus Chief Who Hid People From Nazis](#)

## Media

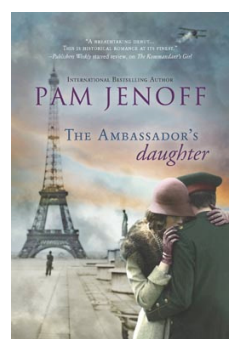
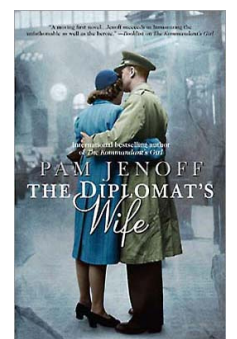
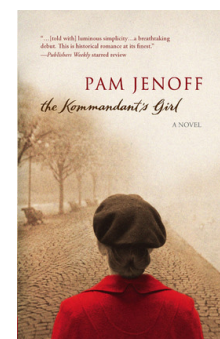
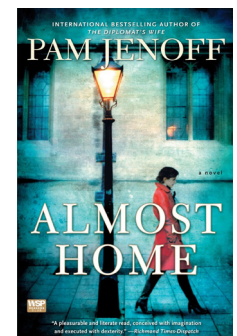
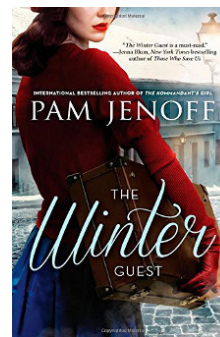
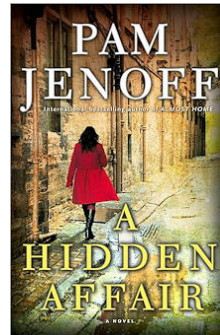
YouTube: [The Yiddish lullaby, “Raisins and Almonds”](#)

[Lyrics to “Raisins and Almonds”](#)

Flickr: [A postcard from the Lorch family circus](#)

YouTube: [What Noa’s initial training might have looked like](#)

## Additional Pam Jenoff Titles



JBC Book Clubs, a program of Jewish Book Council, provides resources and support for book clubs interested in reading books of Jewish interest. On the Jewish Book Council website, find thousands of book reviews, discussion questions and discussion guides, thematic reading lists, and more. JBC Book Clubs is a one-stop shop to build and enhance your book club's conversations—let us guide you on your literary journey.

Jewish Book Council, with roots dating back to 1925, is the only nonprofit dedicated to the promotion of Jewish-interest literature. For nearly 70 years, we have supported and celebrated Jewish authors and books, and used literature to bring people together for meaningful discussions around Jewish life, identity, and culture.

Visit us at [www.jewishbookcouncil.org](http://www.jewishbookcouncil.org)

