DEAR READER,

Thank you for choosing *In Memoriam* for your book club! It’s a book as much about the yearning wistfulness of first love as it is about war. I hope you’ll enjoy it!

The book begins at an idyllic boarding school in the English countryside—think *Brideshead Revisited* or *The Secret History*. Henry Gaunt and Sidney Ellwood are close friends despite their differences: Gaunt is hulking, gloomy, and a violent pacifist, whereas Ellwood is glamorous and popular and romantically thrilled by the prospect of fighting in a European land war.

Both of them are in love with each other. But it’s 1914, and they have no way of communicating this.

Soon they and all their friends have enlisted and been sent to the Western Front. Against the terrible backdrop of war, the tension that has always simmered between Gaunt and Ellwood comes to a head. But the question now is whether they—or any of their friends—will survive.

I’m thrilled when people tell me that they read *In Memoriam* all in a couple of sittings. Despite the grim subject matter, I think it is in many ways an uplifting novel about friendship and love. There are so many wonderful books to read, so I’m very honoured that you’ve chosen to spend time on *In Memoriam*—I hope you like it!

Yours,

Alice Winn
From the inspiration for the book’s title to conversations between Ellwood and Gaunt, Tennyson’s poetry is referenced throughout *In Memoriam*. As said in Chapter One, “Like every English schoolboy, he knew Tennyson’s ‘Charge of the Light Brigade’ off by heart.”

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**The Charge of the Light Brigade**

by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

**I**

*Half a league, half a league,*  
*Half a league onward,*  
*All in the valley of Death*  
*Rode the six hundred.*  

“Forward, the Light Brigade!  
Charge for the guns!” he said.  
*Into the valley of Death*  
*Rode the six hundred.*

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**II**

“Forward, the Light Brigade!”  
*Was there a man dismayed?*  
*Not though the soldier knew*  
*Someone had blundered.*  
*Their not to make reply,*  
*Their not to reason why,*  
*Their but to do and die.*  
*Into the valley of Death*  
*Rode the six hundred.*

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**III**

*Cannon to right of them,*  
*Cannon to left of them,*  
*Cannon in front of them*  
*Volleyed and thundered;*  
*Stormed at with shot and shell,*  
*Boldly they rode and well,*  
*Into the jaws of Death,*  
*Into the mouth of hell*  
*Rode the six hundred.*
IV
Flashed all their sabres bare,
Flashed as they turned in air
Sabring the gunners there,
Charging an army, while
All the world wondered.
Plunged in the battery-smoke
Right through the line they broke;
Cossack and Russian
Reeled from the sabre stroke
Shattered and sundered.
Then they rode back, but not
Not the six hundred.

V
Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon behind them
Volleyed and thundered;
Stormed at with shot and shell,
While horse and hero fell.
They that had fought so well
Came through the jaws of Death,
Back from the mouth of hell,
All that was left of them,
Left of six hundred.

VI
When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they made!
All the world wondered.
Honour the charge they made!
Honour the Light Brigade
Noble six hundred!

Alfred, Lord Tennyson
December 9, 1854
Before enlisting in the war, the main characters attend Preshute College—an idyllic boarding school in the English countryside. The Preshutian is their school newspaper, and throughout the novel, students receive weekly dispatches informing them of their older classmates killed or wounded in action. Our Preshutian is inspired by the edition featured in the first few pages of the novel.
The novel starts off with excerpts from The Preshutian, and newspapers and letters play an important role in the communication of life-or-death information (literal and figurative) throughout the war. What effect did these media have on your reading experience and ability to know the characters? In particular, how did reading the obituaries written on the field—by Ellwood and others—reinforce the intimacy with which the boys were being asked to confront the totality of life at such a young age?

Throughout the book, Ellwood in particular defers to poetry and other literary references (Tennyson, Shakespeare, etc.) to convey or admit to feelings that are too intense—or even illegal—to speak of explicitly. How does this tactic preserve the boys’ relationships at school and at war? When it breaks down—and Ellwood cannot find the poems he once knew—what might this reveal about how his feelings have changed in light of his experiences on the front?

Discuss how Gaunt and Ellwood change roles in their relationship over the course of the novel, as it pertains to communication, sex, and survival on the front, separately and together. At what point does one become more dominant or confident compared to the other? How does this affect each man’s sense of themselves?

Ellwood tells Gaunt the first time they have sex that “It doesn’t mean anything, Henry. Only that we want to forget things, once in a while” (page 108). What are they trying to forget in this moment, and how does the nature of their intimacy change over time?

Discuss the love triangle between Maud, Ellwood, and Gaunt. How does Maud’s presence highlight and reinforce the
6. On the front, Gaunt and Ellwood are at risk as soldiers and as lovers. Which risk is greater, death or injury or being found out?

7. How do we learn about the psychological effects of war? Consider Hayes’s breakdown (Chapter Seventeen), to which Ellwood replies, “I think you’re so frightened of losing your mind that you’re driving yourself insane” (page 201); and later Ellwood’s interactions with Maud, Gaunt, and his family after his injury, including Gaunt’s reflection: “It felt like loving a brittle impostor, one who had stolen Ellwood and would not return him. And yet, Gaunt was powerless: he loved every part of Ellwood, changed or not. If there was a lonelier feeling, Gaunt could not imagine it” (page 343). Was society prepared to handle how the war was changing the soldiers’ psyches, as well as the psyches of those who stayed home?

8. What details about the physical effects of war—hunger, fatigue, injury, pain—stood out to you most? Was there a line between the men’s experience as men—i.e., humans—and as animals? How did this division manifest itself in how their “bodies were used to stop bullets” (page 338)?

9. Discuss the shifting politics between the Allies (England, France, etc.), Central Powers (Germany, etc.), and neutral countries, as revealed in Gaunt’s motive to enlist, his rescue from the battlefield, his experience in the POW camps, their attempt to escape into the Netherlands and reception by the farmer, and Maud’s attraction towards Berlin after the war when England rejects the “Surplus Women” (page 371). What does this suggest about the reality of the terms of war—how easily do ideologies shift, on a national and an individual level?

10. What’s the significance of the men’s attachment to Adam Bede in the POW camp? What does the world of that novel (published in 1859) offer the soldiers by way of distraction, comfort, or focus in such an intense space?
11. What could have gone differently—better or worse—in Devi’s escape plan? Where does he get the ingenuity and perseverance to attempt (and fail) to escape ten times? What do you think happens to him after the war?

12. How do Gaunt and Ellwood’s assumptions about each other’s fate after Gaunt’s fall in battle affect their will to live, as well as to kill and perpetuate the violence of the war? Who and what are they fighting for in the end, including when Ellwood returns to France?

13. How do the members of the Roseveare family allow for Gaunt and Ellwood’s survival, on and off the battlefield? What does the family’s experience demonstrate by way of an answer to the repeated question of who suffers most during war: parents, soldiers, or women?

14. Cyril Roseveare says of their time at Preshute that “It’s your peers. Your friends [who raise you]. You can’t imagine how much we loved it, even when it was awful” (page 275). What lessons do the boys teach each other in school about the connection between love and violence, and how does that translate into their relationships in war? As young soldiers, who do they learn most from about how to fight and love, live and die?

15. When do the boys—Gaunt, Ellwood, and their friends—become men? Are they men in the sense of how their fathers and grandfathers served in their families and societies? What indicators are there in the novel of a changing dynamic for not only gender roles, but the place and necessity for men’s emotions to be expressed?

16. Have you read any literature written during or after World War I (see suggested reading below)? If so, what about this novel aligned with those more contemporary accounts of the Great War, as well as how wars since (through the present day) are depicted in writing and other media? What’s changed (or not) about the effects of war on the human spirit?
17. What was your impression of the image chosen for the jacket/cover of the novel—a dark scene from No Man’s Land? Which is a more powerful way of imagining this place for you—a literal image, as in a photograph, or the writing?

18. Revisit the author’s “Historical Note” at the end of the novel. Did you sense the authenticity of her descriptions of the battle scenes and other aspects of the war experience while reading? Did learning about the characters’ real-life inspirations change your impression of them?

19. What do you imagine happens to Gaunt and Ellwood after the novel ends? Does Ellwood’s recitation of the line from King Lear open a possibility for him to be able to love Gaunt again, which Gaunt fears is impossible? What does love—romantic or otherwise—mean in the postwar period?

20. What aspect of the In Memoriam writings stood out to you most by the end of the war—the stories of the men who died, or the act of memorializing done by the men who lived? Who is being memorialized more in those reflections? Consider the newspapers and Ellwood’s battle poetry and his rendition of Tennyson’s “In Memoriam” for Gaunt.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Waiting for Eden
by Elliot Ackerman

The Runaways
by Fatima Bhutto

Testament of Youth
by Vera Brittain

At Night All Blood Is Black
by David Diop

Maurice
by E. M. Forster

The Art of Fielding
by Chad Harbach

A Farewell to Arms
by Ernest Hemingway

The Great Believers
by Rebecca Makkai

The Things They Carried
by Tim O’Brien

Counter-Attack and Other Poems
by Siegfried Sassoon

“In Memoriam A. H. H. OBIIT MDCCCXXXIII: 106”
by Alfred Lord Tennyson

Johnny Got His Gun
by Dalton Trumbo

Alf
by Bruno Vogel

A Little Life
by Hanya Yanagihara