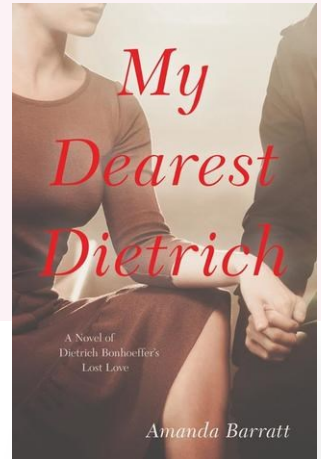




LEADER'S GUIDE

MY DEAREST DIETRICH BY AMANDA BARRATT



"Based on detailed historical research into both Maria's and Dietrich's lives, this true love story is at once beautiful and heartrending."

THEMES

Love Christian Hope Sacrifice Suffering Endurance Persecution
Defence of the Oppressed

HEADS UP! (TRIGGERS AND DELICATE TOPICS)

War and Violence Martyrdom

CHARACTERS

Maria von Wedemeyer is a free-spirited eighteen-year-old woman who feels beauty deeply and is surprised by her affection for Pastor Bonhoeffer during a brief encounter. After the deaths of her father and brother in service of the Wehrmacht, she despises Hitler's war and the damage it has caused her family. She desires to see the German Resistance overcome the Nazi regime more than ever.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is a theologian and founder of the Confessing Church. This movement opposed the Reich church's pro-Nazi regime to "unite" all churches into a single pro-Nazi German church. Dietrich publically served in the Abwehr but secretly was a double agent in the Resistance.

Hans von Dohnanyi is Dietrich's brother-in-law and co-conspirator. He is high ranking in the Abwehr and responsible for keeping and collecting documentation of the atrocities committed under Hitler's regime.

Ruth von Kleist-Retzow is Maria's grossmutter. She is fond of Dietrich and introduces him and Maria. She hopes Maria and Dietrich will be married and becomes quite meddlesome in their affairs.

(Please see pages 13-15 for the Author's Character List)

STORYLINE

'My Dearest Dietrich' is a delicate and melancholy historical fiction novel inspired by the true story behind Dietrich Bonhoeffer's lost love Maria von Wedemeyer, who was the eighteen-year-old daughter of an anti-Nazi Prussian landowner.

This story expertly weaves together actual historical events from World War II while using plausible fiction and imagination to fill in the missing pieces between Dietrich and Maria. Featuring excerpts of letters between the lovers and Dietrich's writings, the story humbly completes a beautiful picture of what might have been.

Dietrich and Maria met in June of 1942 amidst World War II. Dietrich is quickly enchanted by Maria and her carefree and beautiful spirit, and Maria herself is intrigued by Pastor Dietrich. Maria knows that Dietrich is involved in the conspiracy to overthrow the Nazi Regime, which puts him in imminent danger and shrouds his life in secrecy. Maria knows she cares deeply for him - enough to accept his offer of marriage - despite her mother's strong opposition and the threat and imprisonment or death on his life if he is caught and tried for treason. As the German Resistance unravels, Dietrich is imprisoned at Tegel Prison. After the failed assassination attempt on Hitler's life, documentation is found at Abwehr headquarters, revealing the names of those involved in the Resistance. Dietrich is put to death by hanging.

Throughout his time in prison, Maria could only visit Dietrich briefly 17 times. They were allowed to write to one another, however, much of their relationship was developed through private letters smuggled into the prison by Corporal Knobloch. Although their love was lost and never consummated, this story tells of steadfast faithfulness, true Christian hope, and Christian heroes worthy of our remembrance.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & TALKING POINTS

1

Q. Before reading this book, did you know much about Dietrich Bonhoeffer or other Christian heroes?

TALKING POINTS

Some of us may know about many Christian heroes and missionaries, while others know little or none. This is a great opportunity to share about Christian heroes and missionaries who've inspired us.

Dietrich was an author and may be known for his books;

- The Cost of Discipleship (1937).
- Life Together (1938).
- Ethics (1943).
- Christ the Center (1933).
- Creation and Fall (1932–33).
- Act and Being (1930).
- The Communion of Saints (1927).
- Letters and Papers from Prison (1944).
- Other include commentaries of prayers, psalms etc.
-

2

Q. What has stayed with you since reading the novel?

TALKING POINTS

The atrocities which occurred during World War II were overwhelmingly evil. Historical fiction, biographies, and novels have a unique way of sharing the emotive side of history, which textbooks often lack (as textbooks can be dull texts of dates, facts and paragraphs full of information and missing the personal or emotional side of the stories).

Answers may vary and could include;

- The love story between Dietrich and Maria.
- The Resistance, assassination plots, conspiracies and methods used to attempt to thwart Hitler.
- The methods used by Gestapos and other Reich personnel to interrogate and harm others who were against their regime.
- Those who sacrificed themselves for their faith and the sake of others.

3

Q. What did you find most intriguing about Dietrich and Maria's love story?

TALKING POINTS

Dating (courting) during this period of history is significantly different to how we usually do things today;

- It may be surprising that Dietrich and Maria knew so little of each other before becoming engaged.
- Maria's mother's role in dictating the boundaries of their courting was a unique and sad hindrance to Dietrich and Maria's relationship.
- The public announcement of Dietrich and Maria's engagement once he was imprisoned – Maria had this opportunity to separate herself from Dietrich privately, yet she chose not to.
- Dietrich's passionate and unmet desire to be close to Maria was tragic.
- Dietrich and Maria's relationship had a lasting impact on her, and she kept all of his letters.

4

Q. Dietrich asks, "Why did so few raise their heads and look about them? Why did those who took a stand remain a minority" (p114)? Discuss.

TALKING POINTS

Sins of omission – when we know we ought to do good but do not – are often easier to accuse others of doing. Having hindsight, it may seem straightforward to us that Hitler's regime was evil; we may even say we would have been one of the few who stood up to this terrible regime, but there are many reasons why people did not, and it often stemmed from fear;

- Many people were fearful of torture and death, both for themselves and their loved ones.
- Men needed to provide for their families so they didn't starve to death. Women often had children and elderly parents to care for.
- Some people may not have known who to turn to or how to help. They may have felt alone in their concerns and unable to act.
- We often assume the best of others or can become misled, believing intentions are good.
- Many people were genuinely led astray by Hitler's regime and convinced by his propaganda that what he was doing was the best thing for Germany.
- Many of the atrocities were discovered after the war ended, and many people did not understand the extent of Hitler's sins and crimes.

We would all like to think of ourselves as incapable of being the villains of history – but our sinful human nature unites us all, just as Christ unites all who love him (no matter our opinions on this question). We must remember that God opens our eyes to sin and gives us a conviction to fight for the oppressed.

5

Q. Dietrich becomes familiar with "feining patriotism while inwardly plotting resistance" (p78). Discuss.

TALKING POINTS

Is lying ever okay? How did Dietrich come to terms with what he felt he must do?

- Dietrich came to terms with his actions as he felt he was on a mission to restore the soul of his country. He has seen the true scale of the evil occurring and has decided the end justifies the means; his goal is a repentant Germany turning from sin toward Jesus.
- Dietrich knew they would never be successful if they were 100% honest.

Only God can decide whether Dietrich's actions were sinful. It's important to remember that sin begins in our hearts, and the heart posture is something the Lord assess. Dietrich's actions were self-sacrificing for the good of others and to restore worship and glory to God. He did not lie and scheme for selfish ambition.

6

Q. On page 191, Dietrich is asked to comfort Rudolf, who plans to sacrifice himself to end Hilter's regime. Do you agree with what Dietrich said?

TALKING POINTS

"Christ gave His life so that we might live. If you've put your trust in God, Rudolf, I have no doubt you will dwell with Him in Paradise" (p191).

Thoughts;

- The only unforgivable sin in the Bible is blaspheming the Holy Spirit (Matthew 12:31).
- Dietrich authentically prayed for Rudolf and genuinely sought God's guidance in a terrible circumstance.
- We cannot judge another's eternal fate, but we can commit them into Jesus' careful and tender care, trusting their soul to Him.

7

Q. Dietrich and Eberhard's friendship is tested as Dietrich battles jealousy toward his and Renate's happiness. Can you relate to how Dietrich felt? If you're comfortable, share a time when you've experienced envy and how you overcame it.

TALKING POINTS

Why is jealousy harmful to relationships, and how can we take those sinful feelings to God?

- We are instructed to mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice.
- When we allow ourselves to become jealous, we not only reject this mandate but question God's good plans for our own lives.
- Jealously prevents us from gratitude towards God for our blessings and leaves us unable to help friends through their struggles in a genuine way.
- When we surrender and accept God's sovereign will for our lives, we can rejoice and mourn with others and live from a place of contentment.

8

Q. "It's not child's play. It's dangerous. For the men and for us" (p257). The Resistance used many covert techniques for information sharing and sabotage. What fascinated you most about these methods?

TALKING POINTS

Some of the covert activities include;

- Hidden messages in books using dots.
- Dietrich and others being "double agents" and smuggling of Jewish people out of Germany.
- Speaking in blacked-out rooms and hiding documentation in the roof/floors and walls.
- Listening to UK radio for short bouts of time to remain undetected.

9

Q. As Dietrich's imprisonment continues, Maria questions whether or not she can continue in her grief as his fiancée. Why did Maria choose to remain faithful? Would you have made the same steadfast and faithful decisions she made? Why, or Why not?

TALKING POINTS

Dietrich and Maria's commitment to one another is admirable. However, it's worth considering the difference between a commitment to marriage and an engagement. Maria would have been able to break her engagement to Dietrich without sinning (so long as she felt God's direction to do so). In contrast, marriage is regarded as a lifelong commitment.

- It's possible that Maria may have experienced guilt and felt unable to break off the engagement.
- At some point in time, both Dietrich and Maria knew that their relationship would forever remain an engagement. Maria and Dietrich would have mourned an entire life together, both the physical and emotional love that only husbands and wives experience.
- As Maria commits to being Dietrich's fiancée, she may have realised that there would be a time when she would move on and marry, despite him being gone.
- Maria's love for Dietrich was built on a firm foundation of Christian love, admiration and mutual respect. This kind of love is more than mere feelings or infatuation, and therefore able to weather the storms of life.

10

Q. Dietrich lived a faithful, grateful and inspirational life. How did you feel at the end of the story? How did Dietrich truly live what he preached?

TALKING POINTS

Thanking God in all circumstances requires us to keep our eyes firmly on eternity;

- We need enough faith to see past our pain and see the fruit God is growing in us.
- We may need to learn to surrender and abandon our own plans, hopes and comforts.
- We can only overcome our human tendency towards ingratitude with the help of the Holy Spirit.
- Dietrich focused on working where he was planted, and we can too.

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