

The Beautiful Possible

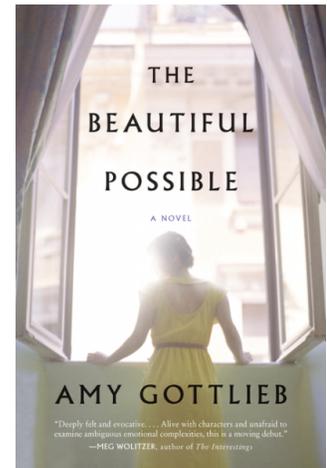
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Introduction

Spanning seventy years and several continents—from a refugee’s shattered dreams in 1938 Berlin, to a discontented American couple in the 1950s, to a young woman’s life in modern-day Jerusalem—this epic, enthralling novel tells the braided love story of three unforgettable characters. In 1946, Walter Westhaus, a German Jew who spent the war years at Tagore’s ashram in India, arrives at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City, where he meets Sol Kerem, a promising rabbinical student. A brilliant nonbeliever, Walter is the perfect foil for Sol’s spiritual questions—and their extraordinary connection is too wonderful not to share with Sol’s free-spirited fiancée Rosalie. Soon Walter and Rosalie are exchanging notes, sketches, and secrets, and begin a transcendent love affair in his attic room, a temple of dusty tomes and whispered poetry. Months later they shatter their impossible bond, retreating to opposite sides of the country—Walter to pursue an academic career in Berkeley and Rosalie and Sol to lead a congregation in suburban New York. A chance meeting years later reconnects Walter, Sol, and Rosalie—catching three hearts and minds in a complex web of desire, heartbreak, and redemption. With extraordinary empathy and virtuosic skill, *The Beautiful Possible* considers the hidden boundaries of marriage and faith, and the mysterious ways we negotiate our desires.



Questions for Discussion

1. How do you understand Abraham Joshua Heschel’s quote: “Books are no more than seeds; we must be the soil and the atmosphere in which they grow” and Walter’s quote: “The words of the texts echo in the lives of the people who read them.” How are these related ideas expressed throughout the novel?
2. Paul and Madeline are secondary characters whose actions shape the plot. What roles do they play in the story and do these characters share any similarities?

3. Why doesn't Sol consult with Walter directly for help in writing his sermons, and why does he suggest that Rosalie go to Berkeley? How is Sol both conscious and unaware of Rosalie and Walter's affair? What does this reveal about his character?
4. What role does Rosalie's father play in the story, and how are the teachings of the Ishbitzer Rebbe expressed throughout the novel?
5. During the fire at Eden Ranch, Walter calls out Sonia and Josef's names, among others. What does this scene signify in the story?
6. Compare the ways in which Sol and Rosalie express their grief after Lenny dies. What does this reveal about their individual perspectives on faith?
7. In "The Fourth Night" chapter, do you think Sol becomes aware of the connection between Walter and Maya? How is this suggested, and what remains enigmatic?
8. Compare Rosalie's and Maya's understanding of Jewish tradition. How are their spiritual sensibilities alike and how do they differ?
9. Madeline says to Rosalie, "It takes three, sweet pea.... A man and a woman and a living spark that keeps all the desire in motion." Explain what this means in the context of the novel. Do you agree with Madeline?
10. Sol says, "It's better to be a spiritual civilian than a spiritual leader." What contributes to his ambivalence about his profession? How does Maya reinterpret this in her own approach to becoming a rabbi?
11. Why doesn't Rosalie tell Maya about Walter? Why does Madeline finally tell her?
12. What is the point of view in this novel, and how does the book within a book motif relate to the story?
13. The connection between Walter, Rosalie, and Sol is described as a braid. Does this braided love story carry a sense of betrayal, a suggestion of redemption, or both? If betrayal, who is betrayed? And if redemption, who is redeemed?
14. Whom do you consider to be Maya's spiritual parents? Explain.

15. What role does Bev play in the story?
16. What does the title *The Beautiful Possible* refer to?
17. Do you think Maya's life in Jerusalem fulfills Sonia's dream? Why or why not?
18. In her closing letter to Madeline, Maya writes, "Inside every story lies the hidden kernel of an infinite one." What does this line mean in the context of the novel? Discuss how this statement finds expression in your own life.