



Rachel's Secret

By BJ Hoff

Book Group Discussion Questions

1. Dr. David Sebastian is aware that holding a negative opinion of a patient could actually affect his judgment and even the course of treatment for a patient. In spite of that, he has a difficult time with remaining objective about Jeremiah Gant, largely because of his close friendship with Rachel, her mother, Susan, and his other Amish friends and patients. Have you or someone you know ever battled with similar difficulties in being impartial toward another person based, not on fact, but rather on your fear that that person might be a poor influence on or even a danger to someone you care about? If so, how did you handle this dilemma?
2. Phoebe tries to explain to Rachel and her mother her conviction that providing shelter to runaway slaves is God's will, even though it's against the law of the times. Do you think she's trying to align her own motives with God's will, or do you believe there are events that call for the breaking of man's law so that God's will can be accomplished? Examples?
3. Eli, Rachel's deceased husband, is another example of the breaking of man's law, but in this situation it was because he was trying to protect Rachel from attack. Even though he knew he was violating the Amish way by meeting violence with violence, he loved his wife too much not to make a stand against her attackers. How do you, personally, feel about this tenet of the Amish faith—to abstain from violence even in the face of violence being inflicted upon you?
4. How do you interpret Samuel Beiler's behavior toward Rachel? Do you find him protective or manipulative?
5. Rachel indicates in her thoughts that her anger and resentment toward Samuel could be mitigated by his simply talking with her as a friend rather than as her deacon or an adversary. Have you ever had an experience with someone you know well wherein hard feelings or conflict possibly could have been avoided had that person treated you with respect and kindness rather than indignation or censure? How did you handle that confrontation?

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6. During his travels with runaway slaves, Asa has discerned that some of their “helpers” gave them assistance more from a sense of duty or obligation, and with some fear for their own safety, rather than with a willing spirit and true charity prompted by the love of God and a love for their fellow man. When we extend our help to another, in any form, how can we make certain we do so with the right motives?
7. How does the setting—the river, the season of winter, the snowstorm—affect this novel? Did it affect your mood, and if so, in what way?
8. Who do you consider to be the strongest, most memorable character in this story? In what ways do this character’s attributes relate to our everyday life, not just the novel?
9. The Amish of Riverhaven are suspicious of Jeremiah Gant at first. What happens to at least partly alleviate their doubts about him?
10. While getting to know the Irish-born Jeremiah Gant, the British-born David Sebastian asks himself: “The British and the Irish. A case of old wounds that continued to fester, with hope of healing almost beyond imagining. What would it take to end that ancient, bitter enmity?” How would you answer that question?
11. Rachel’s young sister, Fannie, says she believes that “forgiving is called that because it’s a gift you give someone.” She goes on to say that “...my back and other places where they hit me still hurt sometimes. But ever since I forgave them, my heart doesn’t hurt. And that was the worst hurt of all.” Why do you think that forgiving the boys who attacked her was the key to easing her “heart hurt?”
12. The Amish believe that the Lord’s Prayer means exactly what it says: “forgive us as we forgive our debtors.” Do you take the prayer literally—do you believe that if we don’t forgive our debtors, Jesus won’t forgive us? Why do you think forgiveness of others is so important to God?