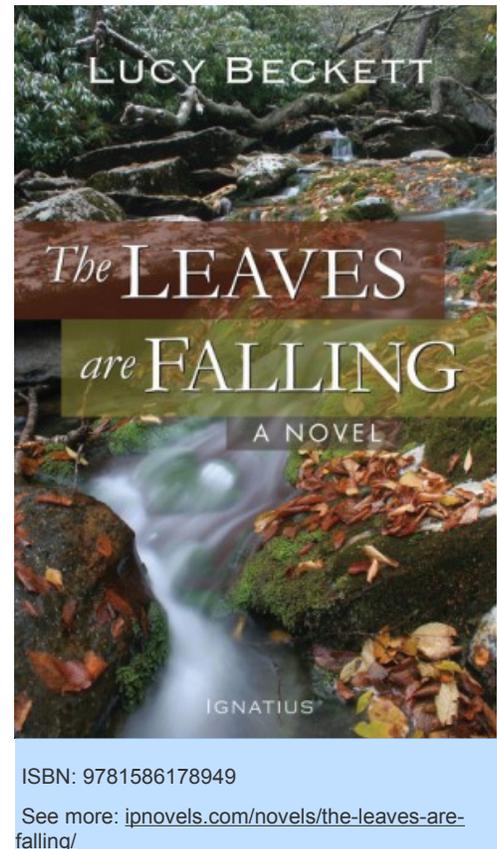


Discussion Questions for *The Leaves Are Falling*

1. Do you find Joe Halpern a sympathetic and believable character?
2. Is his young self consistent with his old self?
3. Is his father, Dr. Jacob Halperin (the Russian spelling of the name), who is very different from his son, also a sympathetic character?
4. What have you learned from the novel about a part of Europe that is as unfamiliar in the UK as it is in the US?
5. Although Britain was not invaded by Nazi Germany, the country was very much affected by World War II. In what ways does the novel suggest this?
6. What do you think of the two German prisoners of war on the farm in Yorkshire? Does either of them teach you something about Germany before, or after, World War II? Or perhaps both of them?
7. One of the things that rescues Joe from being haunted by the horrors of his childhood is the kindness of strangers. Are we right sometimes to understand this as the goodness of God mediated by ordinary people?
8. What impact does his meeting with Max Hofmann have on Joe?
9. There are two real historical figures in the novel, both in the prison at Kozelsk: Major Zarubin, the NKVD interrogator, and Rabbi Steinberg. What do you think of putting real people into a novel?
10. The prison at Kozelsk really was in the Optina monastery, the most celebrated monastery of 19th century Russia, visited by Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, desecrated in the Russian Revolution. (The Russians have done their best, since the collapse of the USSR, to conceal the history of the place, now restored as a monastery.) How does the monastic past of the buildings affect Dr. Halperin?
11. Twice in the novel a senior intelligence officer tries to enlist a promising possible agent. What do these scenes have in common? How are they very different?
12. Which of the minor characters in the book do you think will stay in your mind? Why?
13. Had you, before reading the novel, heard of the massacre of Polish officers at Katyn during World War II?
14. The Katyn massacre was one of the crimes with which the Nazis were charged at the Nuremberg Trials: how and why did the Russians conceal the truth for so long?
15. Was Britain after World War II a good place to settle as a refugee?
16. Is it now? (The book has something to say about this.)
17. What kinds of courage are celebrated in the book?
18. Discuss the behavior of Rabbi Steinberg at the deathbed of a Catholic in Kozelsk: did it surprise



or shock you?

19. Why does Joe's marriage play such a small part in the story?
20. Does what the dying Joe, in 2013, feels about Israel surprise, or shock, or impress you?
21. You may know old people who went through terrible experiences, similar to Joe's, in World War II in Europe. Do they talk about these experiences? Has Joe, in a long life in England, talked about them?