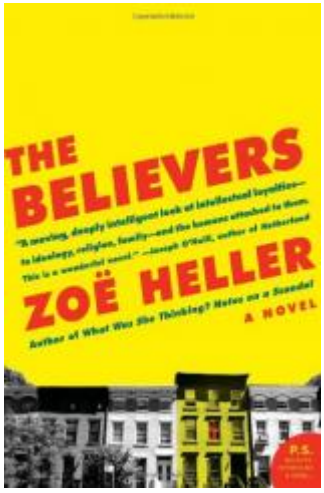
The Believers

by Zoë Heller



About the Book

When New York radical lawyer Joel Litvinoff is felled by a stroke, his wife, Audrey, uncovers a secret that forces her to re-examine her ideas about him and their 40-year marriage. Joel's adult children will soon have to come to terms with this unsettling discovery themselves, but for the meantime, they are grappling with their own dilemmas.

Take Rosa, drawn ineluctably to the faith of Orthodox Judaism, despite her parents' ferocious disapproval of organized religion. Or Karla, obsessed with her weight and trapped in a stale marriage to Mike, who worries that the arrival of a child will create more problems than it will solve in their relationship. Even Lenny, the well-intentioned substance abuser and prodigal son, may not be able to untangle his co-dependencies from his true path in life.

The Believers follows these fascinating characters as they seek their individual destinies in the wake of a domestic tragedy.

Discussion Guide

1. Why does Joel Litvinoff propose marriage to Audrey Howard after their first date, and why does his doing so suggest about his character? How typical (or atypical) is their relationship for a couple married some 40 years?

2. In what wayd does Audrey Feel both more and less in the aftermath of her husband's stroke? How does her behavior toward Joel's colleagues at the hospital compare to her behavior toward her children?

3. How does Rosa feel about her involvement with the girls in East Harlem's Girl Power? To what extent is she an advocate for them? Does her awareness of race and class differences between her and the girls affect her professionalism?

4. Hoe does Karla and Mike's inability to conceive a child after several years of trying affect their marriage? What accounts for their disparate feelings about the possibility of adopting a child?

5. Why is Karla open to a friendship with Khaled after he insults her by asking directly about her dieting? To what extent does Khaled's indulgent, unselfconscious attitude toward food enhance his appeal in Karla's eyes?

6. How serious is Rosa about becoming an observant Jew? What threatens the possibility of her complete conversion?

7. What does Berenice Mason's desire to get to know the litvinoffs suggest about the nature of her intentions? Which sister has better insight into Berenice's motives --- Karla or Rosa?

8. How does the backfdrop of the 9/11 attacks on New York City color the fictional landscape of **The Believers**? To what extent do you perceive a generalized anxiety in the world inhabited by the characters of this novel?

9. What role does Lenny's trip to Bucks County with Jean play in his development and rehabilitation? Why isn't Audrey more supportive of his transformations, and of Jean's role in it?

10. What does the scene at the end of the novel suggest about Karla's future? Why do you think the author chose to close with this character, at this moment of her life? How did this closing scene affect your appreciation of **The Believers**?

Author Bio

Zoë Heller is
the author of two previous novels, EVERYTHING YOU KNOW and
WHAT WAS SHE THINKING?
NOTES ON A SCANDAL, which was shortlisted for the Man Booker
Prize in 2003. She lives in New York.

Critical Praise

"Heller's writing is sharp and edgy…In creating such a vivid, appallingly funny family, Heller…again proves herself a masterful chronicler of domestic drama."Donna Freydkin, *USA Today*

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