

Discussion Guide for
We Must Not Think of Ourselves by Lauren Grodstein

1. The novel is inspired by the real-life Oneg Shabbat project, which aimed to preserve the stories of Jewish occupants in the Warsaw Ghetto during World War II. How did this historical context enhance your understanding of the characters' experiences in the book?
2. Adam Paskow is faced with the choice of joining the group of archivists led by Emanuel Ringelblum. How did his decision impact the trajectory of the story? What would you have done in a similar situation?
3. The book explores the theme of love and defiance in the midst of unimaginable circumstances. How did the relationship between Adam and Sala contribute to the overall narrative? Do you think their love story was essential to the novel?
4. Why did Emanuel Ringelblum embark on creating the Oneg Shabbat project, and how did its objectives evolve throughout the twists and turns of the novel?
5. Considering the harrowing conditions of the ghetto, why do you think more inhabitants didn't attempt to escape? What factors might have influenced their decisions to stay?
6. In the intricate web of survival, everything in the ghetto becomes a trade. What are some of the creative economic systems employed by the Jewish residents to navigate their challenging circumstances?
7. The author vividly describes the living conditions in the Warsaw Ghetto and the challenges faced by its inhabitants. How did these descriptions affect your emotional connection to the characters and the story?
8. The character of Adam is a language teacher who believes in the power of poetry. How does poetry and literature play a role in the characters' lives and in the novel as a whole?
9. The book has received praise for its portrayal of the human spirit's endurance. Can you identify moments in the story where characters displayed resilience in the face of adversity?

10. At the heart of ghetto life, children play a significant role. How does their presence shape the dynamics of the community, and in what ways are they the driving force behind resilience?
11. Henryk Duda, Kasia's father, is a complex character. Reflect on your feelings toward him. Was his affection for Adam genuine, or did he view Adam as a means to his own ends?
12. The affair between Sala and Adam unfolds within the same apartment as her family. Do you consider their actions immoral, or do you believe morality can take on different forms in extraordinary circumstances?
13. Contemplate Adam's decision to switch out the photos in the kennkartes. Were you disturbed by his choice, or can you empathize with the difficult decisions he faced? Would you have made the same decision?
14. Szifra's loyalty to her brothers is unwavering. What elements define her attitude toward them, and why do you think she chooses not to abandon them despite the hardships?
15. Despite not having children of his own, Adam assumes various paternal roles. Explore the nature of his fatherly influence on Szifra, her brothers, and Sala's boys. How does he use poetry as a tool for imparting lessons?
16. Adam discovers a possible escape from the Ghetto, forcing him to make an unbearable choice. How did this dilemma impact your perception of Adam as a character? Were you surprised by his decision?
17. One of the readers mentioned the question, "Is the pen mightier than the sword?" How does the act of documenting the stories of those in the Ghetto contribute to the larger themes of the novel?
18. Nowak, the guard who helps Adam, remains a mysterious character. What impressions do you have of his true nature, and how does his unexpected assistance impact your understanding of him?
19. In a pivotal moment, an Oneg Shabbat archivist criticizes the moral decay among Warsaw's Jewish citizens exposed by the ghetto. Share your thoughts on his speech and how Adam reacts to this harsh revelation.
20. Considering Kasia's fate, do you believe she would have joined Adam in the ghetto? Could they have successfully escaped before the war escalated?

21. The novel has been described as both gut-wrenching and hopeful. How do you reconcile these seemingly conflicting emotions, and what elements in the story contribute to the overall sense of hope?
22. Lauren Grodstein introduces a love story within the historical context of the Holocaust. How did the inclusion of this romantic element impact your reading experience?
23. The author received praise for fleshing out the main characters. Were there specific characters whose stories resonated with you the most, and why?
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26. One reviewer mentioned a potential historical inaccuracy regarding the mention of a transistor radio. How did historical accuracy impact your reading experience? Did you notice other historical details that stood out to you?
27. Do you think Sala's husband was aware of the relationship between her and Adam? Explore the dynamics of their marriage and the potential clues within the narrative.
28. Reflect on a time in your life when every option seemed like a compromise with no clear path to do right by everyone. How did that experience make you feel? How does the characters' constant struggle with compromised choices broaden your understanding of life during the Holocaust in this story?
29. The book touches on the Oneg Shabbat Archive and the importance of remembering historical events. How does the act of preserving stories contribute to our collective understanding of history?
30. Overall, in what ways did the novel deepen your understanding of the Holocaust, particularly focusing on the experiences of those living in the Warsaw Ghetto?