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## *The Memory Book* Book Club Materials:

### Discussion Questions

1. The author describes finding a small book in a Budapest bookstore as a random act. Was her finding the memory book just luck? Why was she there? What was she looking for? Would you have bought the book?
2. There are many poems in the memory book. Did they add to your understanding of the girl? What do you think “memories are but the sediment of time passing by” meant to the girl who wrote the book? What does it mean to you?
3. Describe the young girl. What were her dreams and what were her fears? Compare and contrast the author and the girl. Would you have liked the girl? How long did she live?
4. Here is another poem.

Remember:

If ever you should suffer, look at the innocent rose

Glistening in the light of a rising sun.

You will see it too is moist with tears.

How would you interpret this? Have you ever felt that way?

5. Investigating the book took the author all over Europe. What are your favorite places in Europe? Did the story make you want to see the places described in the book? Do you want to learn Hungarian?
6. Europe is so full of history. Is the history of Europe relevant to you? Why? Why not?
7. This book is about culture. How is American culture different from the culture of Europe now and a hundred years ago? Do you think that America is becoming more European? Is Europe becoming more American?
8. The Memory book is about a young Hungarian girl. Are there any lessons to be learned about raising our young women?

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## A Short Description of the Book and the Author

[The Memory Book - One Woman's Self-Discovery in the Mist of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy](#) recounts the discovery of a century-old memory book and how it connects the author to a girl at the turn of the twentieth century as WWI erupts. It is a touching collection of memories captured in text and art as WWI crept into the girl's life.

## Summary

On a short vacation in Budapest, the author finds a small leather book in an antique store. Opening it she discovers pages filled with watercolors, drawings and messages. The book turns out to be a memory book—a keepsake album kept by Eastern European girls at the turn of the twentieth century in which to record advice and remember special events. This one contains evergreen truisms and aphorisms written to the book's owner when she visited places few Americans know. Curiosity and concern propels the author on a multi-year journey into the heart of Old Europe and deep into centuries of art, history, and war. The book lives, the girl lives on, and its message of love finds meaning in our time.

## Background

Hungary a century ago was a foreign place, but its customs and culture are as exotic today as they were then and equally unfamiliar to many people. One tradition, the keeping of memory books by young girls, is especially arcane. To Hungarians, these unique albums were intimately personal. They recorded scenes and snippets of life for posterity. It was rare to find one in an antique store and in mint condition as Amálka's was. Readers will learn from this memory book what there is to treasure in life even as the times degrade into the war to end all wars.

For the author, digging into the girl's story puts a mirror to our times as no other tome on the past, and there are many written, could. The reader will see the untangling of a girl's memory book shadowed by the history that shaped it. Like layers, the Holy Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the Kaiser's ambitions fall beneath the young girl's feet. Amálka's drawings of pink roses and plump bluebirds nestled among forget-me-nots stand out amid the horrors of World War I.

What American knows of Pécs, Nagyvárád, Szolnok and Novska? When the young girl was born they were all part of the great Hungary. Today Nagyvárád is called Oradea, and it lies in Romania while Novska is in Croatia. These are lost times. Nothing is to be presumed amid its strangeness—Dracula was a hero, annihilation was the rule of all wars, and the dashing Count Andrassy

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as well as the mercurial Empress Sisi outdid any Hollywood epic in our time. When we are done we find that even small lights can shine brightly and that in every age there is hope.

### **The Author**

Linda Fischer is a global traveler with a passion for literature, languages, and the people she encounters along the way. A devoted student of the Hungarian culture, she spent nine years traveling and researching *The Memory Book*. This is her first book.

### **Table of Contents**

#### **Chapter 1: Destination: Eastern Europe**

Like so many New Yorkers, the author and her husband need a break from the city. They decide to travel and Hungary lands in their sights. They arrive, by chance, in Budapest on their national holiday and with fireworks bursting overhead, feel its ancient charm.

#### **Chapter 2: Discovery in Buda**

The author discovers a memory book filled with watercolors, drawings and messages in an antique store in Budapest. It is lovely, simple, and unintelligible. She buys it and carries it back to her apartment in the Big Apple.

#### **Chapter 3: Back Home**

Inspired by the book, the author learns about Hungary and its culture. She pours over books on Austria-Hungary at the turn of the twentieth century. The infatuation with the history grows as does the frustration at not understanding the text.

#### **Chapter 4: Living with A Mystery**

The hunt is on for a translator. The author tries to decipher the text in classic New York style. She goes to a pastry shop where she meets a Hungarian waitress who helps her begin a translation. While some progress is made, it is far from perfect.

#### **Chapter 5: Hunting & Pecking**

The author devotes what time she had to learning about the period and especially what was written in the book. She sends what clues she has to her connections but with mixed results.

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## **Chapter 6: Translating**

The author finds out that there is only one person truly qualified to translate the poetry written in Old Hungarian found in the text. Of course, he is a Hungarian literary scholar at a major American university and a fine gentleman. He agrees to the work and soon the touching words come pouring over the Internet.

## **Chapter 7: Magyar Beauty**

There was much to learn about Hungary and its peoples—the Magyars. And the author learns that she falls into a long literary line which included Ulysses who “cannot rest from travel” and will “drink Life to the lees.” She also finds a long tradition of admiring Magyar women.

## **Chapter 8: Eötvös**

How can one know about America and not its great statesmen? Not knowing George Washington is not knowing us. And not knowing Eötvös is not knowing the people who surround the author of the memory book.

## **Chapter 9: An Era of War**

The book was not written in a vacuum. A socialist labor movement of railway and sawmill workers erupted around the young girl who most likely owned the memory book. And WWI snapped Europe like a twig.

## **Chapter 10: Incubating**

Absorbing the message of all this foreign information and melding it with the gentle words and watercolors created by the young girl and her family and friends takes time. The sociology and tragedy in that period was Big Data, deserving of reflection.

## **Chapter 11: Planning Our Return**

Going back was not a choice. The only question was the timing and itinerary. The timing was her husband's next vacation of course. The itinerary? The girl's travels. Lots of cities with strange names.

And now there had to be a guide to help us navigate not only the trip but another century.

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## **Chapter 12: Scoping Out the Problem**

The author finds an ally in their guide. He has an active and curious mind and dives into the project. After a few emails he is already trying to identify some of the names in the memory book. His work further energizes the project and the author begins to wonder how close she can get to actually identifying the young girl.

## **Chapter 13: Forging Ties**

Prior to visiting Budapest, the author and her Budapest guide Richard discuss how the book could have ended up in the antique store. Richard also queries art historians and antique stores about the quality of the art in the memory book of the young girl. In their assessment, the girl was most likely an art teacher. Richard also tells the author he and his wife are expecting their first child, a daughter. They finalize travel plans to Hungary and Romania.

## **Chapter 14: Back in Budapest**

The author and her husband travel back to Budapest and meet Richard in person. He is affable and resourceful, funny, and knowledgeable. The aphorisms start to come alive and become relevant to the author's travel experiences. The author visits Parliament, Városliget Park, and the New York Café, all of which were famous in Amálka's time.

## **Chapter 15: The Ancient City of Pécs**

The author journeys to Pécs, a city in the south of Hungary where they visit the Inner City Parish Church. Richard, the author, and her husband enjoy a visit to the Zsolnay porcelain factory and Lake Balaton, both popular in the young girl's time as well as today.

## **Chapter 16: All Aboard to Várád**

The author meets Richard's wife Julia at the train station in Budapest. The author, her husband and Richard are on their way to Romania by train. Hungary was known for its train transportation, which was fairly new at the turn of the twentieth century. The author shows off her knowledge of obscure facts related to the memory book and shares some history about Transylvania, which the young owner of the memory book would have known. With the help of a Romanian-American businessman staying at their hotel, they find a great restaurant in Oradea.

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### **Chapter 17: Várad Shower**

Every trip has its moments. They stayed in the best hotel in town. The hot water came from a spring deep underground. Turn on the shower and turn on the smell. The author survives.

### **Chapter 18: Kopjafa, The Carved Biography**

The author meets a Romanian guide, Mr. Dezső Fazekas (name changed to protect privacy), whom Richard had arranged to help them. Mr. Fazekas shares stories of Transylvania, the land beyond the forest. He brings them to a church with a ceiling decorated with Renaissance and astrological motifs. In Cluj, a university town, the author learns more about Transylvania during the time in which the memory book was written. A lunch at a local restaurant exposes the author to ethnic prejudice.

### **Chapter 19: Earthquake, Fire, and Flood**

A statue of King Matthias exposes the author to a history of prejudice amidst a warren of churches. On the walls of one, the dead were memorialized in Latin. Dinner was at a former monastery. It had been a long day.

### **Chapter 20: The Black Eagle**

The author continues on the memory book trail to Nagyvárad. There she finds more churches and a few fragments from the Empire. On to the Black Eagle, a sort of 19th-20th century shopping mall with its own sad history.

### **Chapter 21: The Art Colony**

The author travels to Szolnok, a city in the east of Hungary, which was most often cited in the memory book. She visits the Szolnok Art Colony. The artistic manager shares his thoughts on the art in the memory book and the city of Szolnok. He says the art is not of today's professional standards but reflects the skill of a teacher.

### **Chapter 22: New York City**

Here the author reflects on the travels and how much she has learned. Now she can see the value of lingering at her pleasure over a sunset, a lilac or a thought as the book advises. Richard's daughter is born and the author decides to learn the Hungarian language. The language studies are harder

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than she anticipated but she doesn't give up.

### **Chapter 23: The Hungarian Language**

This chapter recounts the author's travails as she delves into the Hungarian language. There is humor amid the complications of new words and grammar.

### **Chapter 24: The Hungarian Culture**

The author attends an event at the Hungarian Cultural Center in New York City. The lecture provides a synthesis of the complexities of European and Hungarian history.

### **Chapter 25: New Year New Options**

The author and her husband plot another trip to Hungary.

### **Chapter 26: Searching the Archives in Szolnok**

The hunt is on to find the young girl who owned the memory book. At the Szolnok archives, Richard narrows it down to a possible 120 girls with the right name and birth date. Then down to one likely person. Can we prove it?

### **Chapter 27: Winter Time**

Nothing happened quickly. Why not put out an ad and just ask people? In the end we needed to decide on a genealogist. But should we? Where would it go? The answer may not be a good one.

### **Chapter 28: Life Goes On**

We all decide. There is no stopping now.

### **Chapter 29: The Genealogist**

The genealogist's results came in. The author learns the identity of the girl, whom the author calls Amálka in deference to Hungarian privacy laws, and her family members. Not everything by any means but a sketch of the family tree. What else could we find?

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### **Chapter 30: Closing in on Things**

We are touched. Births, weddings, deaths of people long gone. We get close. Very close. But we aren't going to get completely definitive. She just wasn't famous enough to leave bigger footprints. It is enough, the author feels. Good enough or at least good enough for government work—by a gang of amateur sleuths. She is satisfied.

### **Chapter 31: Vienna in a New Light**

In a bit of a victory lap the author sets out to see Novska, the last city in Amálka's book. Now the Old Empire is alive before her. The author starts her travels in Vienna, visiting the most famous sites of the empire and understanding them deeply.

### **Chapter 32: Heading to the Outskirts of a Former Empire**

The author travels to Lake Bled, Slovenia and Opatija, Croatia. Both were renowned Austro-Hungarian spa resorts at the turn of the twentieth century. At Lake Bled, she visits the island in the lake and tries the famous Bled Kremšnita cake. In Opatija, at the beach, Richard asks the author and her husband to be godparents to his new daughter. The author thinks Amálka would be very happy with her new family.

### **Chapter 33: Novska**

The author passes through Zagreb on the way to Novska, Croatia, the location of the first entry in the memory book. The time still lives on in a 1906 post office if you know what to look for amid the worn out air conditioners and the bullet holes. Amálka's mother came to Novska in 1906.

### **Chapter 34: More Traveling**

Only it isn't just more traveling. The author has done her touring. Now she experiences this old culture.

### **Chapter 35: Finding Amálka**

The author travels back to Szolnok and examines the personal depth offered by experiencing the history of the city and the devastation it experienced during World War I. Standing in front

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of the statue of a dying soldier, the intensity of the death in a dying soldier and the dreams of a young girl coalesce during the war to end all wars. The author followed the beckoning of a book and soft words and she hopes others will too.

### Chapter 36: Postscript

The author closes with an update on the people she met during the course of the story.

### Supplement 1: The Morgan Library

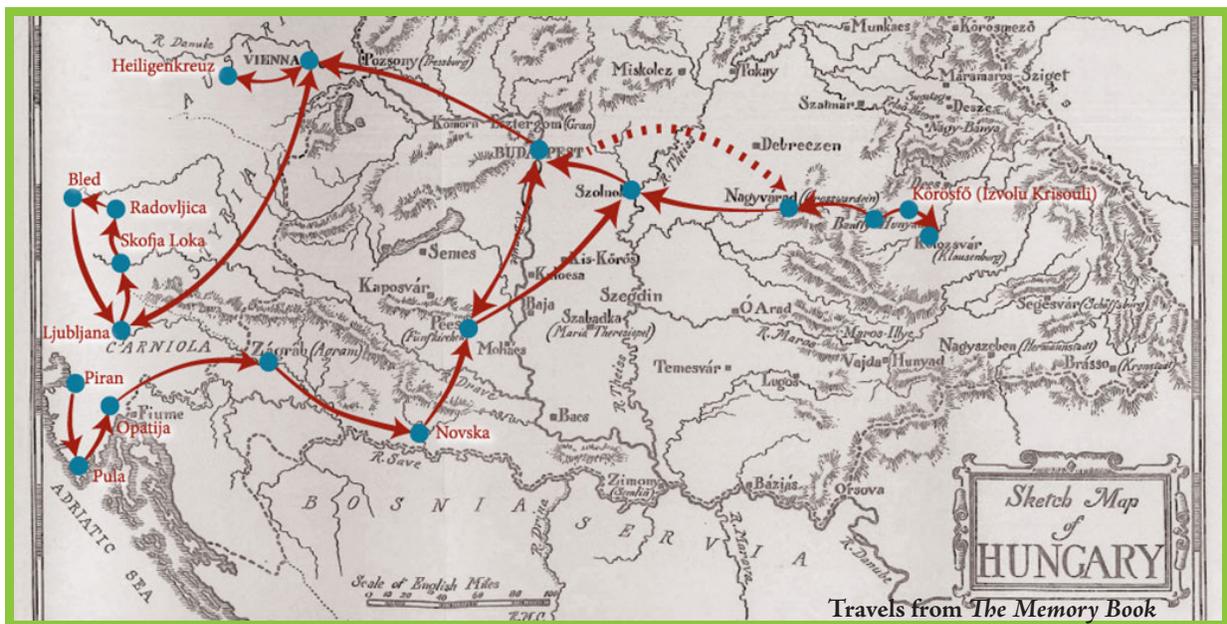
Through research at the Morgan Library and access to an authentic Matthias manuscript, the author learns that Amálka's simple book follows an artistic tradition going back centuries in Hungary.

### Supplement 2: Poetry Snippets

Poetry is a cornerstone of the Hungarian culture. The author shares some of her favorites.

### Supplement 3: An American Kremšnita Recipe

Kremšnita is too delicious to forget. The author shares its history and creates an American version.



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