OFFICIAL BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION GUIDE

# The Second Coming of Joan

*by Ray Lopez*

RAYLBOOKS · A NOVELLA OF FAITH IN WARTIME

## A Note from the Author

Thank you — truly — for choosing this book for your club, and for every reader who has carried Nadja's story with them after the last page. Years ago I read Mark Twain's *Joan of Arc*, and the Maid never left me; when the story of a little girl in Sarajevo began to press on my heart, it was my daughter, Tebben, who urged me to keep Joan in the story. What I hope stays with you is this: God still hears the prayers nobody taught us how to pray, and He is still able to do a new thing — so pray without ceasing.

*— Ray Lopez*

## Discussion Questions

**1. First Impressions**

The title promises a "second coming" — not of Christ, but of Joan of Arc. What did you expect from that title and from the preface's history of the Bosnian war before the story began? How did the dedication and the preface shape the way you read everything that followed?

**2. Opening Hook**

The novella opens with a startling sentence: Nadja "didn't know she was Muslim until the war started." What does that line tell us about the world Nadja lived in before the war — and about how quickly identity can be turned into a reason for hatred? What were you feeling by the end of the first chapter, when her father leaves to fight and tells her to take care of her mother and brother?

**3. Character Motivation**

Nadja has never been taught religion — her mother insists there is no God — yet in the camp she begins to pray "from her heart," and heaven itself takes notice. What drives an eight-year-old to pray when no one has shown her how? How does her reading of the hidden Joan of Arc book shape the prayers she prays?

### 4. Supporting Cast

Irma carries this story as much as Nadja does — burning the other books yet letting her daughter keep Joan ("keep it hidden, always"), enduring the unspeakable, and later counseling other women at the barracks. How did your understanding of Irma change across the book? Which other supporting character stayed with you most: Danir, Joanna the Red Cross volunteer, Ranah the journalist, or Captain Petrovic — and why?

### 5. Setting as a Character

The story moves from a Sarajevo apartment, to a basement, to a cage, to refugee buses crossing a scarred landscape — and, in dreams, to a green bank beside a summer lake. How does each place press on the family's faith? Why do you think Nadja's meetings with Joan happen in the worst place and in the most beautiful one?

### 6. Core Theme — When God Sends a Woman

In heaven, the angels marvel that a saint has never before been sent into battle — "and a female saint, at that!" — yet God remakes Joan as "a new creation" and sends her anyway. What is this book saying about whom God chooses, and about the gifts the world overlooks? How did Joan's own earthly story — doubted, tried, and burned — prepare her for this assignment?

### 7. Core Theme — Pray Without Ceasing

Joan teaches Nadja that praying without ceasing means being mindful of God in every breath — and later, a sunlit verse in 1 Thessalonians calls Nadja back to prayer after she has stopped. Trace Nadja's prayer life across the book: the cage, the rescue, the silence in Croatia, the return. When have you found prayer hardest to keep up — in the crisis, or after it?

### 8. Secrets & Turning Points

So much turns on hidden things: a wooden box behind a furnace, a book kept under a jacket, prayers no one else hears, and a secret Michael finally reveals to Joan about the voices of her own life. Which turning point changed the story most for you — the finding of the book, Joan's first appearance in the cage, the lost book on the bus, or another moment entirely?

### 9. Moral Gray Areas

The book refuses easy categories: two young guards stop, weep, and help Irma; a captain orders the assault halted; a journalist's ambition nearly devours the very women she came to honor; a mother burns holy books to keep her family alive. How did you judge these people, caught inside an evil system? Where did you find yourself extending — or withholding — grace?

### 10. Memorable Passage

Each member: choose one scene or line to read aloud. Candidates might include Nadja naming the UN soldiers her "blue knights," her cry of "There is no other book," Joanna finishing the sentence about praying without ceasing on the mountain road, or Irma's counsel to Ranah to be "quick to listen and slow to speak." What made your passage lodge in you?

### 11. The Ending & Beyond

The book closes in a cottage in Velp, a family sleeping in peace — while in the realm between heaven and earth, Michael tells Joan, "We're just getting started." What do you make of an ending that is both restful and unfinished? What trials and healings do you imagine ahead for Nadja and Irma, and what would you ask the author if he joined your meeting?

## Enhance Your Book Club Meeting

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| **Themed Recipe** | **Warm Apple Pita & Bosnian-Style Coffee.** When the family reaches their cottage in Velp, a stocked kitchen and warm pastries are waiting — a small picture of welcome after war. Recreate it with a simple Bosnian apple pita: toss 4 sliced tart apples with ½ cup sugar, 1 tsp cinnamon, and a handful of chopped walnuts; layer between sheets of buttered filo pastry in a baking pan; bake at 375°F for 30–35 minutes until golden; dust with powdered sugar and serve warm. Brew strong coffee and serve it in small cups, unhurried — in Bosnia, coffee is never rushed, and neither should this conversation be. |
| **Atmosphere** | Print or display a map of the family's journey — Sarajevo to Croatia, through the Dinaric Alps and along the Danube, to Copenhagen and finally Velp, in the Netherlands — and let Joanna's geography lesson guide your evening. Light a candle at the center of the table for the women and children of Srebrenica, and open with a moment of quiet before discussion begins. |
| **Icebreaker** | **"The Book That Carried Me."** Nadja's hidden book carried her through the basement and the cage. Go around the circle: each member names a book, a verse, or a song that carried them through a hard season — and one sentence about why. Keep it brief; the stories will do the rest. |
| **Further Reading** | More from Ray Lopez: **Hard Knocks** (2020), the first volume of his memoir trilogy; **Hard Love: A California Memoir** (2021); **Hard Faith: A Final Memoir** (2021); and **The Painter** (2022), his novella based on true stories from his years as a federal probation officer. Discussion guides for book clubs are available at raylbooks.com. |

## Invite Ray to Your Meeting

Ray Lopez loves book clubs — and he would love to join yours. Invite him to appear at your meeting for a **free 15-minute Zoom or FaceTime Q&A** with your group: bring your questions about Nadja, Joan, and the writing of the book.

To arrange a visit, use the Contact page at **raylbooks.com**.