BOOK CLUB MEETING PACK

The Safekeep

Printable meeting plan + discussion questions + activities
Winner of the Women's Prize for Fiction 2025 · Shortlisted for the Booker Prize 2024

Meeting date: _____

Host: _____

Location / link: _____

Tip: Start spoiler-free. Only use the spoiler pages if everyone has finished the book.

Welcome

The Netherlands, summer 1961. Fifteen years after the war, Isabel lives a quiet, tightly controlled life alone in her late mother's country house in the province of Overijssel, where every object has its place and every day has its routine. Then her brother Louis turns up with his new girlfriend, Eva, and announces that she will be staying for the season while he is away.

Eva is everything Isabel is not: easy-going, chatty, careless with the furniture, and friendly with the maid. Before long, valuable things begin to go missing from the house, and Isabel's irritation tips into something far more consuming. Winner of the 2025 Women's Prize for Fiction and shortlisted for the 2024 Booker Prize, this slow-burning debut is part domestic drama, part psychological thriller, and part love story, with one enormous question running underneath it all: who does a house, and a history, really belong to?

Content note

This book contains sexual content, the Holocaust and its aftermath, antisemitism, wartime trauma and famine, theft and dispossession, and emotional cruelty and manipulation between characters. Please take care, and skip any questions your group doesn't want to cover.

Meeting plan (60–90 minutes)

0–10	Warm-up (3-word vibe / would you rather inherit the house or be the one who has to ask for it back?)
10–50	Spoiler-free discussion
50–70	Spoiler zone (optional)
70–80	Mini activity: The Inventory
80–90	Ratings + vote for next month

House rules (optional but helpful)

- No spoilers until the group agrees to enter the spoiler zone
- Disagree with ideas, not people
- It is OK to pause: this book is quiet on the surface and unsettling underneath

Quick character cheat sheet

Isabel — our main character;precise,privateandfiercelyprotective of the house and its routines, living alone in her late mother's home.

Eva — Louis's girlfriend, sent to stay with Isabel for the season; warm, untidy and impossible to ignore. Isabel finds her infuriating and cannot stop watching her.

Louis — Isabel's younger brother, charming and often absent, who brings Eva into the house.

Hendrik — Isabel's older brother, and the one with the most say over what happens to the family home.

Neelke — the maid, whom Isabel suspects of stealing, and whose place in the household says a lot about class and who gets noticed.

Uncle Karel — the relative who found the house for the family in the last, hungry winter of the war.

Themes to watch

Repressed desire and the discovery of self • home, ownership and who is entitled to what • historical amnesia and the things a country, and a family, would rather not discuss • siblings, resentment and old hierarchies • objects as memory • how quiet, polite surfaces can hide enormous pressure • living in the shadow of the Second World War, fifteen years on.

Discussion Questions (Spoiler-Free)

1. Describe the book in three words, then compare answers.

2. The novel opens on Isabel's carefully ordered routine. What was your first impression of her, and did it change as the summer went on?

3. Why do you think Yael van der Wouden chose the title The Safekeep? Who, or what, is being kept safe?

4. Isabel and Eva are complete opposites. How did you feel about their early clashes, and whose side were you on?

5. The house and its belongings carry enormous weight in this story. Which object, room or detail has stayed with you?

6. Isabel, Hendrik and Louis each have a very different relationship with the family home and with each other. What did you make of the sibling dynamics?

7. Isabel quickly suspects Neelke the maid of stealing. What does that reaction tell us about how Isabel sees the people around her?

8. The writing is controlled, spare and restrained. Did that quiet style build tension for you, or keep you at arm's length?

9. The war is officially over, but it is everywhere in 1961. How does the book show a country trying to move on?

10. How would you shelve this book: literary fiction, romance, historical fiction or psychological thriller? Who would you recommend it to?

Spoiler Zone

Onlyuse this page if everyone has finished the book.

1. The secret at the heart of the house changes how we read everything that came before. When did you begin to suspect, and what did you notice differently on reflection?

2. How did your opinion of Eva change once her reasons for being in the house became clear? Did you feel deceived, or did you understand her?

3. Isabel and Eva's relationship is built on desire, power and deception all at once. Was it love, obsession, or something that can't be neatly labelled? Can a relationship survive a foundation like this?

4. Isabel and her brothers benefited from what happened to the people who lived in the house before them. How responsible is each sibling, and where does the book draw the line between knowing, not asking, and not wanting to know?

5. The novel draws on the real postwar experience of Dutch Jewish survivors, who often returned to find their homes and belongings in other hands. How well do you think the book handles this history?

6. Did the ending feel like justice, revenge, or something else entirely? What would real repair look like for the characters?

7. Your own question:

Mini activity: The Inventory

Give everyone a slip of paper and ask them to choose one object from the house in the book (a piece of silver, a chair, a room, a key) and write down who they think it belongs to, and why. Is it the person who uses it, the person who inherited it, the person who looked after it, or the person it was taken from? Read the answers out and compare: does the group agree on what makes something yours? (Keep it spoiler-free by choosing objects from the opening chapters, or save it for after the spoiler zone.)

Ratings + next month

Rate The Safekeep out of 5, then vote on next month's pick together.

1 2 3 4 5

Our next pick: _____

Next meeting date: _____