

The Light Between Oceans

Discussion Guide

The Light Between Oceans is a beautiful and haunting film from director Derek Cianfrance (**Blue Valentine** and **The Place Between the Pines**) adapted from the novel by M. L. Stedman. When Tom Sherbourne (Michael Fassbender) accepts a temporary post as a lighthouse keeper on Janus Island off the coast of Australia, he quickly falls in love with one of the local villagers, Isabel (Alicia Vikander). The two marry, and Isabel joins him on the island, where they endure two tragic miscarriages. So when a dingy washes ashore with a dead man and a screaming baby, Isabel takes this as a sign. Against Tom's better judgment, they keep the child, name her Lucy, and raise her as their own. Around Lucy's christening ceremony three years later, Tom learns about Hannah (Rachel Weisz), a woman whose husband and infant daughter were lost at sea around the time he and Isabel found Lucy. The news devastates Tom, who can no longer keep his family's secret and chooses to face a life in prison to keep Isabel safe.

The Light Between Oceans feels like a classic romance drama, in part, because it draws on rich mythological, emotional, and spiritual themes and conflicts. Below are a series of suggestions for conversations around the film.



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Life is Greater than Death

One of the many strengths of **The Light Between Oceans** is the rich cast of characters at the heart of the story. Tom Sherbourne is a complex individual, the epitome of still waters running deep. A veteran of the Great War, he has seen too much death and destruction and longs for the solitude of Janus Island. However, early in the film the island strikes an ominous tone with stories of the previous lighthouse keeper's suicide. Is this barren island what Tom needs after all? His experiences in Europe haunt him on Janus Island, and the film's sound design helps disorient the audience: does Tom hear the sound of crashing waves or are those memories of bombs exploding on the battlefield? Tom takes on a job that helps save lives, guiding sailors safely to shore, but he is in need of help as well.

Bolstered by another stellar performance from Alicia Vikander, Isabel breathes new life into Tom's decaying spirit. Her beautiful presence, her inquisitive nature, and her deep love for Tom bring him back to life. She knows what Tom needs because she has also personally experienced loss with the deaths of her two brothers in the same war. As the story progresses, they experience death together in the form of two miscarriages and, in a way, the threat of Tom's impending life imprisonment. Throughout their lives together, Tom and Isabel chose life: they refuse to give into despair after the war; misguided though the choice may have been, they save an orphaned child and eventually return her to her birth mother; Tom sacrifices himself for Isabel; and Isabel ultimately saves Tom by telling the truth of their experience. In all of these cases, Tom and Isabel prove, once again, that life can win out over death. Suffering, loss, decay, brokenness, and death do not have the final say.

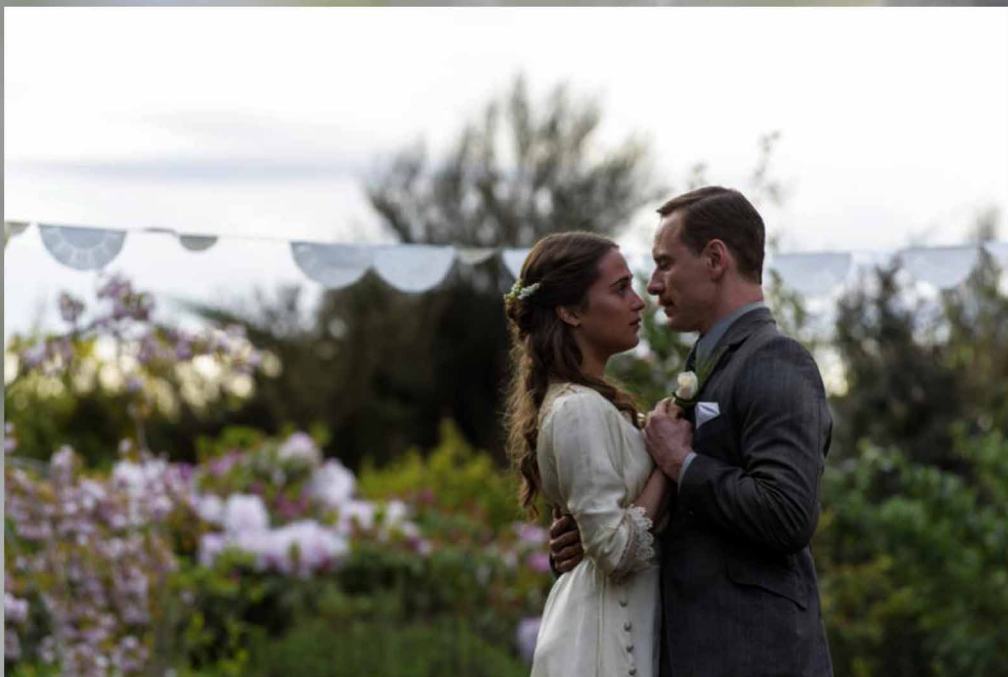


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Keep the Light Burning

Closely following the previous discussion topic is the notion of light as a metaphor in **The Light Between Oceans**. As several characters point out in the film, the lighthouse on Janus is a vital service and the care of it is equally important. Without it, ships will lose their way and wreck. With it, ships bring resources (and prosperity) to the local communities. The lighthouse requires round-the-clock care: it has to be lit and tended to every night; the mirrors and glass have to be cleaned to increase visibility; and the surrounding property has to be maintained and protected against the elements. This is hard work that requires devotion. Someone must inhabit the island and the lighthouse.

The Light Between Oceans embodies the famous poet John Donne's assertion that "no man is an island." Tom would challenge this theory, but Isabel won't let him. Isabel knows that we have to inhabit others' lives and be inhabited by others in return. Simply said, we have to care for one another in order to keep the light—love, goodness, humanity, whatever you want to call it—burning. It can be tempting to wall ourselves off or to retreat to islands of our own making. Being in relationship, living in community, and caring for others is hard work. People can be difficult to love. Letting others care for us can make us uncomfortable as we seem vulnerable or weak. In the end, however, making these sacrifices—giving of our time and energy to care for others and letting go of our pride—is the only way that we can survive in an often dangerous and hostile world.



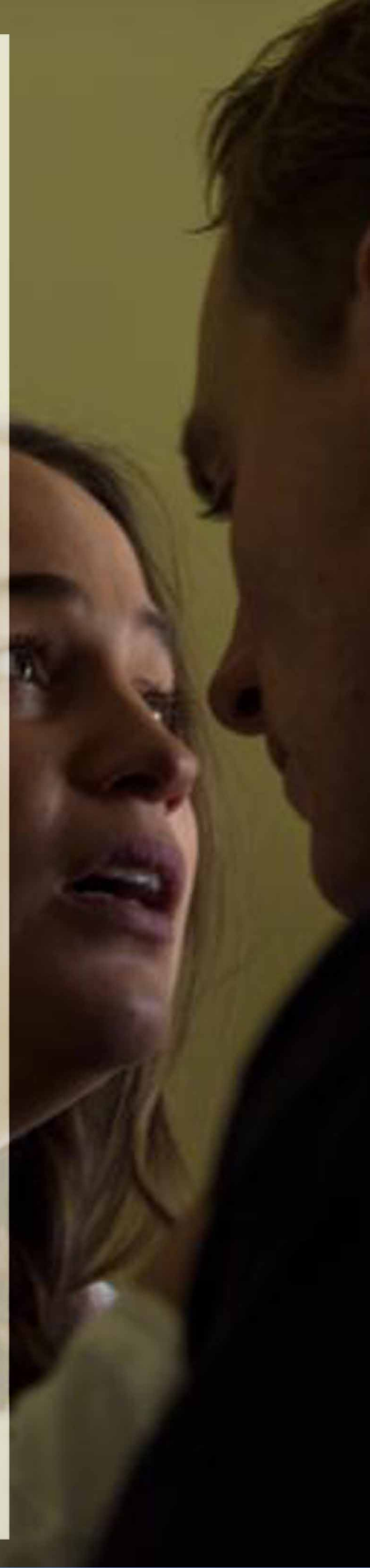
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Grief and New Identities

One of the most effective elements of **The Light Between Oceans** is its portrayal of grief and how devastating the death of a child (or any close loved one) can be. Alicia Vikander's performance of Isabel's miscarriages is almost too good to watch as her body and spirit are wracked by pain and sorrow. Her screams, tears, and movements convey what words cannot...that this is an experience from which she will never fully recover and one that will leave a lasting mark on her life.

This experience of profound loss recalls a conversation that Isabel had with Tom earlier in the film. She reflects on the death of her two brothers in the war and how it has impacted her parents' lives. She knows that a wife who loses her husband is a widow and that a child that loses its parents is an orphan. But what do you call a parent that loses a child? There is no distinct name for this new identity, because they never stop having been a parent. Their offspring has been snatched from them, but they go on loving that child even as their identities have changed in drastic ways.

Thankfully, Tom has no answer for Isabel. He doesn't offer empty platitudes because he knows first-hand the emptiness of which Isabel speaks. While we are often quick to offer words of comfort and encouragement to those in mourning and do so with good intentions, might Tom's silence and silent devotion to Isabel be a source of inspiration for us? As those around us suffer tragedy and loss, perhaps we suffer silently with them and serve them in small, quiet ways as they wrestle with new identities that cannot be named.



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Impossible Situations

The Light Between Oceans is such a moving and challenging viewing experience because it is built on what we might think of as a series of impossible situations. It's the kind of film that forces to ask ourselves what we would do if we found ourselves in similar scenarios. What would we do if—after failed pregnancies on a deserted island—we found an orphaned infant? Would we testify against our spouse if it meant that we could keep the child we had adopted and loved for so many years?

In many ways, **The Light Between Oceans** mirrors other stories from mythology or classic religious or literary texts. While these much older stories often contain fantastical elements, it is important to remember that the facts about them aren't as important as the deeper truths to which they point or the questions they force us to ask ourselves and one another. Stories like these should give us pause to not only reflect on the characters' choices but to think about notions of right and wrong, of good and evil, and of justice and injustice. While we are often quick to make sweeping, universal claims about these themes, **The Light Between Oceans** excels because it muddies these waters, so to speak. By filling its narrative with difficult (or impossible) situations, the film shows us that what we often define in black-and-white terms is often a more complex shade of gray.



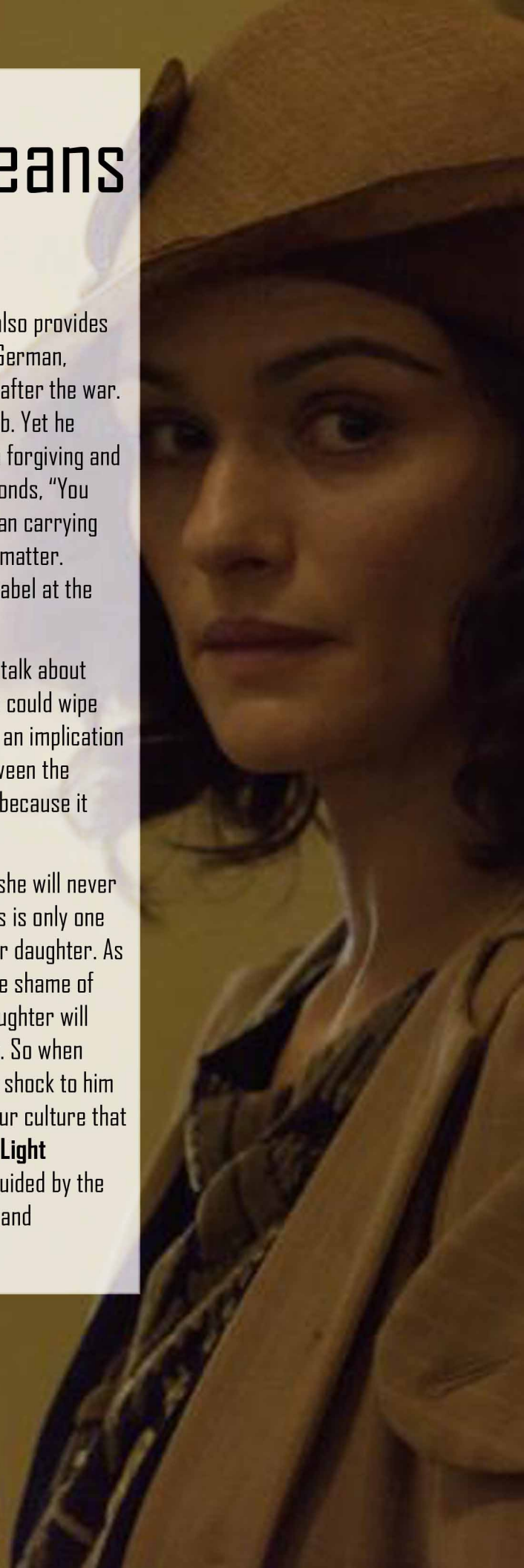
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Lighten the Load

Along with its morally complex narrative, **The Light Between Oceans** also provides much-needed insight into the nature and practice of forgiveness. As a German, Hannah's husband Franz was something of a pariah in their community after the war. In fact, he took to the ocean with their daughter to escape an angry mob. Yet he never harbored hate in his heart. In a flashback, we learn that he was a forgiving and loving person. When Hannah asks him how he can live this way, he responds, "You only have to forgive once." He tells her that forgiving is much easier than carrying around feelings of resentment all day, or for an entire lifetime for that matter. Hannah takes this lesson to heart as she chooses to forgive Tom and Isabel at the end of the film.

In popular culture, we often have misguided notions of forgiveness. We talk about forgiving and forgetting as if a momentary decision to forgive someone could wipe away the deep pain we feel when someone truly harms us. There's also an implication that this act of forgiving will instantly create warm, happy feelings between the offender and the offended. **The Light Between Oceans** excels, in part, because it shows how difficult forgiveness can be.

It's clear that Hannah doesn't particularly like Tom and Isabel and that she will never forget the horrors that she endured because of their decisions. But this is only one half of the experience: she also knows that they loved and protected her daughter. As a result, she can't bear to see them endure a lifetime in prison. Both the shame of not having done the right thing and the sorrow of losing yet another daughter will haunt them for the rest of their lives, whether they are in prison or not. So when Hannah asks the sheriff for clemency for Tom and Isabel, it comes as a shock to him and, perhaps, the audience. True forgiveness is so foreign to much of our culture that when we see it in films like this, it takes us by surprise. In the end, **The Light Between Oceans** provides a vision for a different path, one that isn't guided by the feelings of revenge or punishment that so often animate our cinematic and real-world notions of justice.

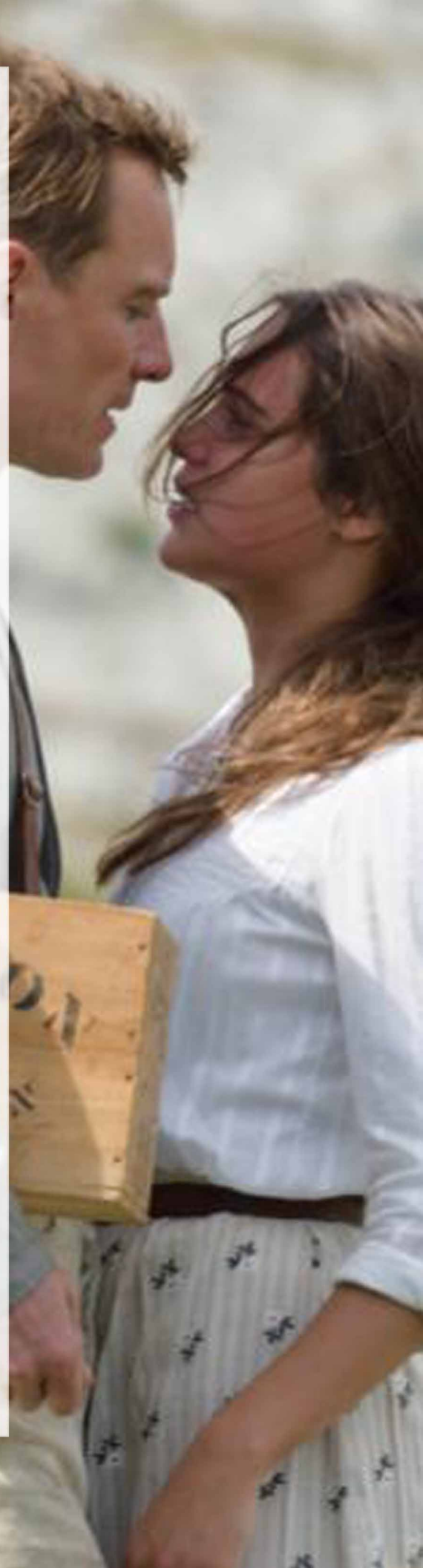
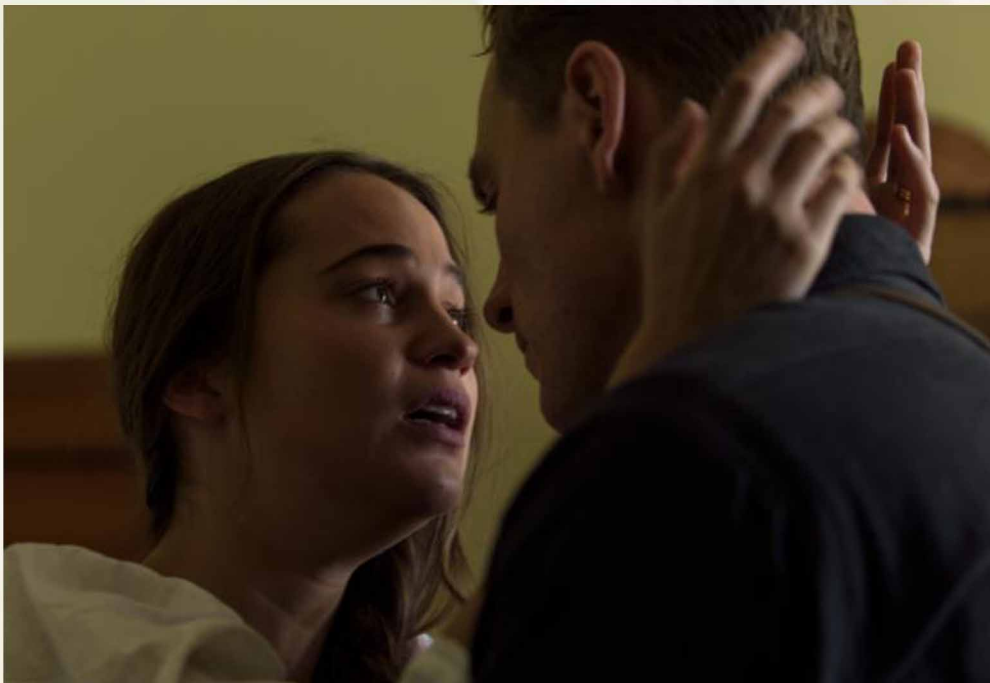


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A Prison of Our Own Making

Towards the end of **The Light Between Oceans**, events jump forward in time, and we find Isabel at the hospital, seemingly on her deathbed. In a brief conversation with Tom, she wonders if she can be forgiven for the choices that she made when she was younger. Tom reassures her that God has forgiven her and tells her that it's time she forgives herself too. This is one of two emotionally powerful epilogues to the main story.

Even though Tom endured prison for a short time in the film, **The Light Between Oceans** reveals that the strongest prisons in which we often suffer are those we construct ourselves. To be sure, we make choices on a daily basis that, to varying degrees, should make us feel both guilt and regret. While these are perfectly natural emotions that help signal that something is wrong in our personal lives or relationships, many of us hold on to them far after they have served their purpose. In doing so, we allow them to invade our lives and rob us of our joy and well-being. They continue to pollute the very relationships they were intended to heal. When we harm others, we should feel guilty, ask them for their forgiveness, and make amends as best as possible. **The Light Between Oceans** reminds us that, having done that, we also need to move forward together into new experiences of life.



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The Arbitrariness of Life

The Light Between Oceans is steeped in a reality with which we are uncomfortable and struggle to understand, life is arbitrary. Tom sizes this reality up with his question about the war: why did he live while so many others died? But the film begs several similar questions: why did Franz and his daughter escape the angry mob only to die at sea? Why did Isabel miscarry and Hannah have a healthy pregnancy? These are all experiences with which most people are personally familiar. It leads us to an overarching question: why do bad things happen to good people?

The responses to this question (and the millions of other questions contained within it like those listed above) are as diverse as the people who offer them. It's important to remember that there is no single, right response to these questions, and that any answer is worked out in community, not in solitude. Like the film, these questions are reminders that life is harsh, but, more importantly, they also encourage us to remember that we are not alone in this suffering. Like Tom and Isabel do for one another in the film, perhaps we can serve one another during these difficult times to alleviate suffering and, in all the chaos and confusion, experience the goodness of life together.

