

“THE BAKER’S SECRET” BY STEPHEN P. KIERNAN

Discussion questions

1. Consider the epigraph from French essayist Jean Guéhenno: “Men are not made for war. But neither are they made for slavery.” How does this apply to the characters in *The Baker’s Secret*?
2. Kiernan writes, “In a time of humiliation, the only dignified answer is cunning.” Do you agree? And how does this statement relate to Emma? In what ways does Emma “answer” the time in which she lives?
3. What do you make of Michelle and her relationship with the occupying Lieutenant? Do you think her fellow villagers treat her fairly?
4. In Chapter 9, Emma starts to suspect that “the single animating energy of Vergers was want.” Is this true? And if so, does everyone in Vergers want the same thing?
5. The village’s covert network of exchange, which starts with Emma procuring light bulbs and ends with fuel for the fisherman, centers entirely on Emma. Why do you think Yves—and all of the other villagers for that matter—entrust Emma with this delicate, dangerous task?
6. Early in the novel we see that Guillaume, as a veterinarian, understands more than anyone else what it means to take a life. When an occupying soldier assaults Emma in Chapter 15, Guillaume intervenes and almost kills him. Was Guillaume wise to let the soldier go? What would you have done in his position?
7. Emma often expresses impatience for the Monsignor’s appeals to faith and religion, yet late in the novel he says Emma has deep faith, as revealed by her deeds. What is your opinion of the Monsignor, and the role of religion in Vergers in general?
8. Whenever any mention of the Allies is made, Emma says, “They will never come.” Does she address this refrain more to herself, or the villagers? Why won’t she validate the hope some villagers feel when she effectively provides hope in the form of bread each day?

