

BOOK CLUB KIT

THOMAS NELSON AND ZONDERVAN FICTION



MICHÈLE PHOENIX

FRAGMENTS
OF LIGHT

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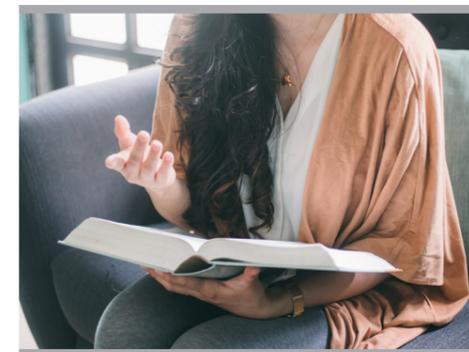
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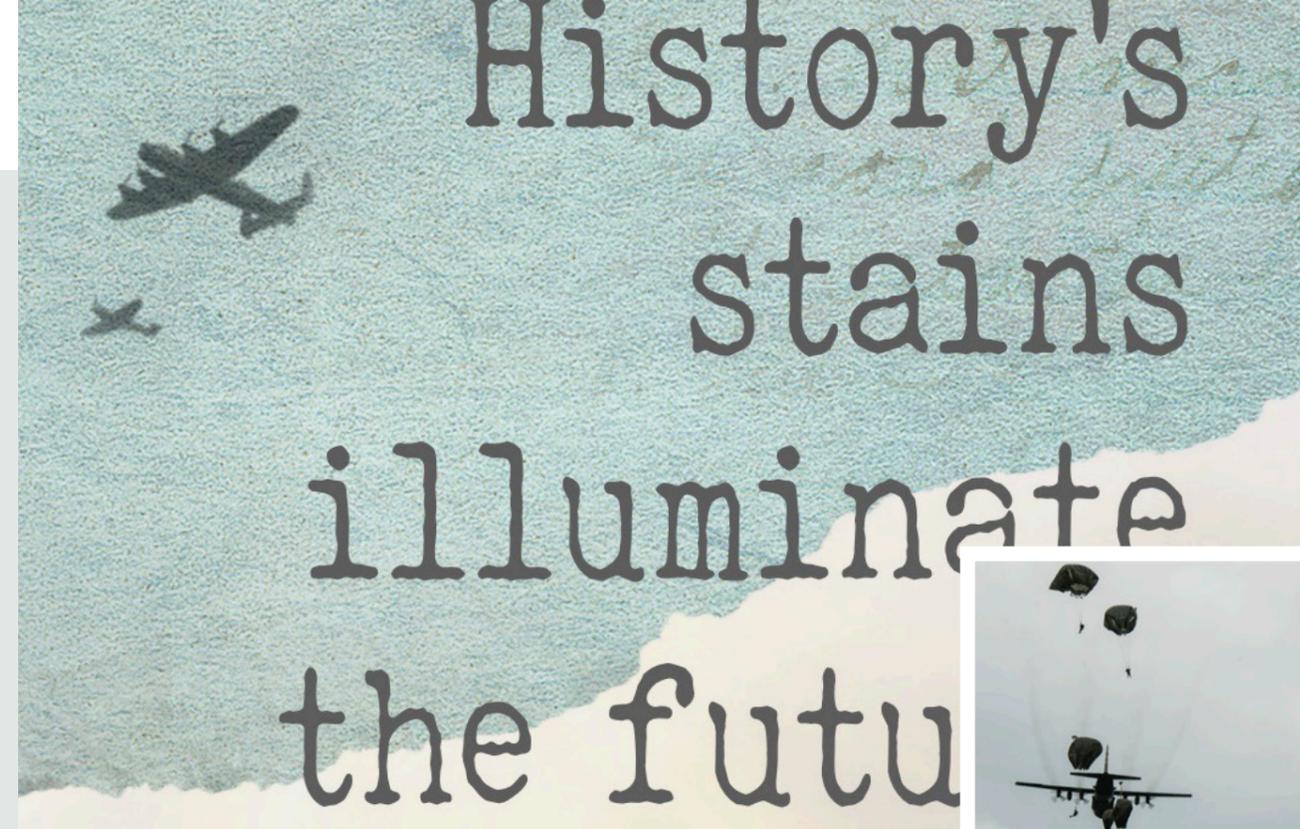


Michèle Phoenix is a consultant, writer and speaker with a heart for Third Culture Kids. She was born in France to a Canadian father and an American mother and taught for 20 years at Black Forest Academy (Germany) before launching her own advocacy venture under Global Outreach Mission. Michèle travels globally to consult and teach on topics related to her experience. She loves good conversations, mischievous students, Marvel movies, and paths to healing.

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Q&A WITH MICHÈLE PHOENIX

The author of *Fragments of Light* discusses her inspirations and influences for the novel, as well as the historical research which underpins this moving story of bravery.



Why did you spend so much time on research for *Fragments of Light*?

WWII depictions often romanticize the events that happened on and after June 6, 1944. With *Fragments of Light*, I wanted to crawl inside the mind of a paratrooper who jumped over Normandy on D-Day and relate his experiences in a more intimate way. Every detail of what he saw, heard, and felt was important to crafting Cal



WITH FRAGMENTS OF LIGHT, I WANTED TO CRAWL INSIDE THE MIND OF A PARATROOPER WHO JUMPED OVER NORMANDY

McElway—an average American soldier thrust into a chaotic conflict, who endured the type of first-person tragedy we don't usually think of when we recall the liberation of France. I was less interested in him being a hero than in him being authentic. That takes meticulous attention to detail and context. To ensure that I accurately described a paratrooper's perspective of D-Day, I enlisted the help of WWII veteran Sergeant Tom Rice. He advised me on the military elements of the novel—from GI weaponry to the interior of a C-47 to jump

protocol. I even included part of Tom's own experience in Cal's storyline: getting caught up on the jump door as he leapt out of the plane. I am so very honored by his participation in this novel. The historical legitimacy he lends to *Fragments of Light* is an immeasurable gift.



The Girl Who Wore Freedom, the WWII documentary for which Michèle Phoenix worked as a translator and which inspired parts of the novel.

You've written two books that feature WWII. What is your connection to those years of the world's history?

I grew up in France, in a small, idyllic village just outside Paris, in which Nazi forces set up the only Lebensborn on French soil—a “baby factory” of sorts. No one ever spoke about that chapter in Lamorlaye’s history while I was growing up. I actually attended 7th and 8th grade in the converted manor that had housed the German birthing center and discovered what it had been only decades later, as I did research for *Tangled Ashes*. As an adult, I moved to Germany and taught for twenty years at an international school. This only deepened my fascination with the war. Living among kind-hearted German people while taking field trips to mountainside trenches and a French concentration camp just across the border—it all fueled my desire to understand the human dynamics and individual costs of the war, neither of which are often mentioned in the WWII summaries of history books. In 2018, *The Girl Who Wore Freedom*, a documentary filming in Normandy that summer, asked me to come along as a translator for the shoot. I had no idea how that experience would inform Cal’s story in *Fragments of Light*. I’d already begun writing the

novel when I went, but staying in the places where the brutal battles had raged, looking into the faces of veterans as they retold their stories and entering into relationship with the elderly French people who had watched the Allies liberate their land—it was sobering, galvanizing and inspiring. I’ve scattered their faces and names across the pages of this novel.

What is one word that summarizes *Fragments of Light* for you?

Brave. The original title of the book actually had the word in it! There are so many facets of bravery in both the contemporary and historic storylines of *Fragments of Light*. Ceelie’s bruised resilience. Darlene’s rugged optimism. Nate’s white-knuckled determination. Sabine’s beyond-her-years stoicism. Even Cal, whose decision after returning home from the war paints him as something of an antihero, displays a flawed sort of courage, a sacrificial commitment to what he thought was right under unfathomable circumstances. All of the book’s protagonists embody their own version of “brave”—a resolve that plays out in brutal scenes of conflict and in small, ordinary, deeply human moments.

What prompted you to address breast cancer in *Fragments of Light*?

We’ve become so much better at openly discussing breast cancer as a society and, as a survivor myself, I’m grateful that it has become less taboo. We recognize the courage of life-altering decisions about surgeries and treatments. We celebrate the fighters with fundraisers and bumper stickers and pink ribbons. But we still fall short in sufficiently recognizing the toll a medical crisis can take not only on the patient, but on the loved one walking alongside her. That’s why I brought Nate into the story. He is a steady, devoted husband who finds his own resilience eroded by Ceelie’s surgery and protracted treatment. Her strength is inspiring and her suffering sobering. But as painful as her own journey is, the parallel path Nate takes changes him too. He has my heart. I love his courage, confusion, vulnerability and determination. He embodies the too-often-ignored attrition of caregivers whose role in a patient’s survival can be just as taxing, though in different ways.



ALL OF THE BOOK’S PROTAGONISTS EMBODY THEIR OWN VERSION OF ‘BRAVE’ —A RESOLVE THAT PLAYS OUT IN BRUTAL SCENES OF CONFLICT AND IN SMALL, ORDINARY, DEEPLY HUMAN MOMENTS.



HOSTING A GREAT BOOK CLUB

Some ideas for a fun and successful book club meeting for *Fragments of Light*

Book clubs are about reading good books, of course, but they're also about so much more: delicious snacks, socializing with friends, considering new perspectives and ideas, and maybe even learning something new. For your book club's discussion of *Fragments of Light*, here are some ideas for all the components of a good book club that you won't find in a paperback.

French cuisine

Since some of *Fragments of Light* takes place in France, why not discuss the novel over French foods? Gougeres, canapés, and

brie (maybe even some French wine?) are sure to delight.

Movie night

For some historical context, consider watching a WWII documentary centering on D-Day and the Normandy invasion. There are many excellent options available on streaming services or even to borrow from your local library. (May we recommend *The Girl Who Wore Freedom*?)

Honor the brave

Fragments of Light explores two topics that touch all of our lives, in some way or another: cancer and war. Many have lost loved ones to one or both of these trials, so discussion of the novel may become emotional. Be sure to leave time in your discussion for book club members to share their experiences, and have some tissues on hand.



“ IT EARNS A “2020 BOOK CLUB
TOP PICK’ FROM ME.”

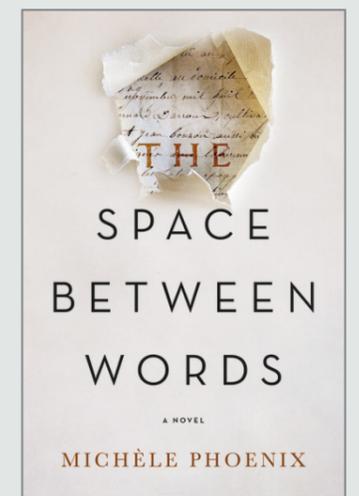
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Use these questions to guide your book club's discussion of *Fragments of Light*. These questions can also be found on pages 341–342 of the book.



ALSO BY MICHÈLE PHOENIX

When Jessica regains consciousness in a French hospital on the day after the Paris attacks, all she can think of is fleeing the site of the horror she survived. But Patrick, the steadfast friend who hasn't left her side, urges her to reconsider. During a stop at a country flea market, Jessica finds a faded document concealed in an antique. As new friends help her to translate the archaic French, they uncover the story of Adeline Baillard, a young woman who lived centuries before—her faith condemned, her life endangered, her community decimated by the Huguenot persecution.



1. The original title of the book had the word brave in it. How do you see each of the principal characters demonstrating bravery?
2. What do you see in Ceelie's thinking and decisions that are a consequence of

surviving breast cancer and having a mastectomy?

3. As Nate tries to repair their relationship, what does he say or do that eventually makes reconciliation possible?
4. What do you see in Nate and Ceelie's story that might have led to their estrangement even without her cancer?
5. Looking back, what might have preserved Nate and Ceelie's marriage?
6. What do you think motivated Cal to abandon his family two months after getting home? And what do you think motivated him to leave his farm and return to France?
7. Is Cal a hero?

8. What made it possible for Lise to honestly thank Buck for fighting in WWII?
9. In what way did the verse "Cease from anger, and forsake wrath" change Claire's life?
10. How can a person realistically "Cease from anger, and forsake wrath"?
11. How might Darlene's life have been different if she'd understood sooner that "the opposite of brave isn't fear—it's resentment"?
12. What do you see as healing moments in Ceelie's journey?
13. How do you see Nate and Ceelie's story playing out in the future?



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This note can also be found on pages 335–337 of the book.

I am a three-time cancer survivor. Just over two years ago, I awoke in the hospital and listened dumbfounded as my surgeon informed me that the mastectomy I'd chosen to prevent a recurrence had actually revealed several malignant tumors. I was at a loss—battered and disbelieving. It took a while for it all to sink in. Nights were the worst. Prognoses seem harsher after dark. Rosy denouements more difficult to envision. Yet in those days following surgery, the same gentle voice that had whispered serenity to me as I'd made the decision to go under the knife was still there. I heard it in the kindness of nurses as they worked to steady my pain and ease my fears. I felt it in my GP's hand on my arm, as she came by early the first morning to sit by my bed and pray for peace. I sensed it in the

Christmas lights and carols, dimmed by pain and uncertainty, but still radiant with the promise of God's overwhelming and sufficient love. Survival is miraculous. It is also torturous. The weeks I spent waiting for pathology results and a treatment plan were hard. And even when the tests finally came back with optimistic conclusions, I couldn't fully celebrate. I'd been staring death in the face for so long that I didn't know how to look away. When I began writing *Fragments of Light*, I knew I wanted

to explore the unspoken consequences, emotional and physical, of breast cancer. But I also wanted the novel to be about "brave"—the kind that shows up in so many ways, under so many circumstances, in so many different lives. The first voice I "heard" was Lise's. A seven-year-old daring to be hopeful when her world told her to be scared. Then I heard Ceelie's. It sounded an awful lot like mine, at times, but without the anchors and buffers of a sustaining faith. I thought Nate would be her bulwark right up until he chose

to walk away. His determination to earn back Ceelie's trust surprised even me. Then Darlene entered the story. She breezed into Ceelie's hospital room unforeseen by this author. And she transformed the novel's trajectory. A serendipitous invitation to be the translator for *The Girl Who Wore Freedom*, a WWII documentary filming in Normandy, completed my cast of overcomers. As I witnessed the expressions of veterans standing on the parapet overlooking Omaha Beach, reliving the day that changed the world's history,

and as I heard them recount their memories surrounded by the citizens of a liberated France, Cal, then Buck, entered my imagination. I let the elements of *Fragments of Light* steep for a while and wondered what bravery would really look like for the war survivors, the cancer conquerors, and those who loved them if they didn't have the kind of faith that fosters peace—that heals the natural resentment of suffering, failure, abandonment, and loss. Claire wasn't in my planning for the book. But she became the anchor point I was hoping for.

"Cease from anger, and forsake wrath" isn't just the sentence a fictitious character underlines in her Bible. It's a life-enhancing and life-restoring invitation to take back the reins torn from our grasp by the perpetrators of harm. It's an exhortation to turn our gaze from the inflictors of our pain to the promises of the One whose love bandages the most maiming of our wounds. I wondered—could the faith of a woman bruised in marrowdeep ways yield generational healing simply by the power of the verse she chose as her survival guide? I believed it could. And in my mind, it did. I envisioned Ceelie later going back to Claire's Bible to consider the other verses Darlene's mother had underlined—the admonishments and covenants that had given Claire's broken life a sense of serenity and meaning. I like to think Ceelie found God there. And an even deeper, more lasting kind of healing.



“ I’D BEEN STARING DEATH IN THE FACE FOR SO LONG THAT I DIDN’T KNOW HOW TO LOOK AWAY.”

WHAT READERS ARE SAYING

Readers love the honesty, the vulnerability, and the themes of bravery and restoration that permeate *Fragments of Light*.

"I chose *Fragments of Light* because I was intrigued by the synopsis. How could an MIA soldier bring closure to a lifetime of heartache, who was Ceelie, and what had cancer stolen from her?"

In order to fully appreciate this story, you have to be willing to wade through some deep emotional waters before you can pass safely to the other side. This is especially true if you know someone who is fighting cancer. Can anyone say their life has been unaffected by cancer? Even if the diagnosis was not your own, you've likely prayed or cared for someone who has undergone treatment. Perhaps you've even lost someone dear to

you, as have I. The prevalence of cancer, as well as the toll it takes on families and friends, will drive the experiences these characters endure home for many readers. Understanding that Phoenix is a three-time cancer survivor herself will further illuminate how she was able to convey their hopes and fears in such a palpable way.

The book's themes of regret, resentment, and forgiveness—leading to restoration—make it well worth your investment of time. I've read 56 books so far this year and *Fragments of Light* distinguishes itself a standout title! It earns a '2020 Book Club Top Pick' from me."

—Shelf -Esteem

“THE FIRST CHAPTER OF *FRAGMENTS OF LIGHT* CAUGHT ME UNPREPARED AND I WAS HOOKED FROM THAT POINT ON.

"Michele Phoenix beautifully weaves two stories told decades apart into one beautiful story that will keep your attention until the end, and likely wanting to continue journey with the characters."

—Amazon Review

The first chapter of *Fragments of Light* caught me unprepared and I was hooked from that point on. As a survivor of breast cancer, the memories of the twelve years since my day-long surgery came flooding back to me. I had not known this would

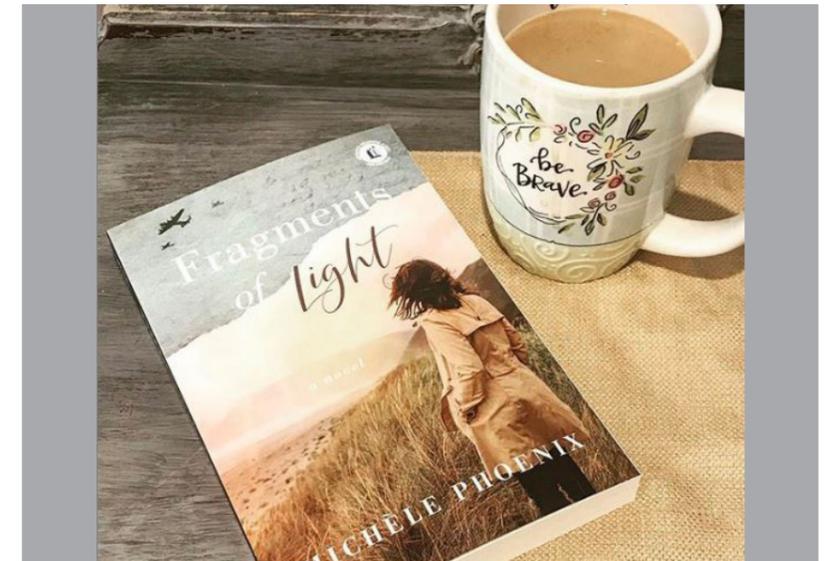
be the beginning of a reading experience that kept me looking for the book whenever I had a spare minute, even thinking about it while at work and trying to figure out what was coming next. Ceelie's battle with breast cancer pulled me into the story and did not let me go. The author wrote in a way that you felt you were right there. The writing was clean and clear and smoothly took this reader along for the ride from start to finish.

—Amazon Review



LIBRARY JOURNAL STARRED REVIEW

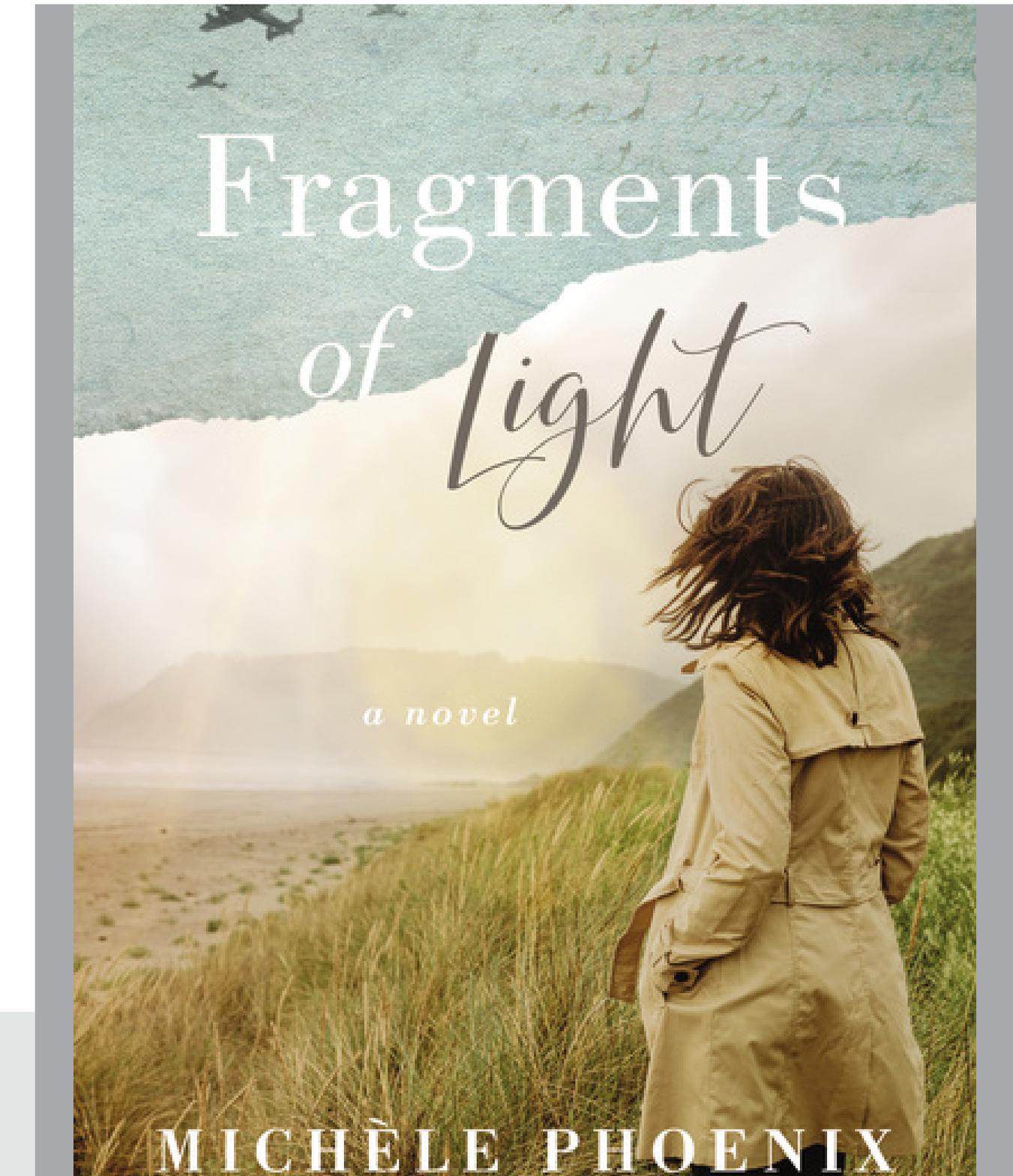
VERDICT A thoughtful and powerful book about how trauma impacts multiple generations and how forgiveness can set anyone on the path to healing.



Coelie and her friend Darlene are tough women, their mettle forged in their shared battle against cancer. Many decades earlier, Sabine and Lise form an equally tough pair, surviving without parents in occupied France. Both sets of characters, however, soon face seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The young orphans find themselves in the middle of the Allied invasion on D-day, and the cancer survivors both receive devastating news. To distract themselves, Coelie and Darlene embark on an adventure to find out the truth behind a handful of World War II-era letters written by Darlene's father—a man described as both a war hero and a deadbeat dad. Phoenix (*The Space Between Words*) weaves the quest for truth through time and space in surprising

ways. From the beaches of D-day to postwar rural America to the sterile cancer ward, the characters are real without being crass and beaten down without losing hope."





Fragments
of Light

a novel

MICHÈLE PHOENIX

FRAGMENTS OF LIGHT BOOK CLUB KIT

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