

Don't You Know There's a War On?

Janet Todd

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Set in post-WWII England, Janet Todd's grim mother-daughter novel, *Don't You Know There's a War On?*, is about boundaries, love, manipulation, and patriotism.

Joan's life was forever changed by the war and by the birth of her daughter, Maud. During the excruciating summer of 1976, Joan, at Maud's prodding, begins to write down the story of her life. The result is an incisive psychological portrait of a disdainful, brazen woman whose survival had painful repercussions.

Upper middle class, virginal Joan becomes pregnant after a disastrous encounter with a young soldier at a party. Though Joan loathes the soldier, they marry, and he is killed in the war. Joan is alone, forced to support herself and her baby, Maud.

Without support from her family or in-laws, Joan leads a stingy existence, both when it comes to finances and emotions. She sacrifices everything for Maud and her country. Maud grows up to be a downtrodden wallflower who's devoted to her mother, though their relationship is threatened when Maud's friend, Phyllis, urges her to follow her passions and become independent.

Joan is a potent narrator whose brisk recriminations and bawdy commentary feature rationalizations for her torturous way of loving Maud. In turn, Maud denies herself everything in hopes of earning her mother's approval. The question of whether they can survive their love for one another centers the novel. Lively and crackling, the book's tension simmers with each turning page. Joan's damage becomes clear through keen emotional and psychological characterizations.

Literary and devastating, *Don't You Know There's a War On?* concerns loss, consequences, and a complex mother-daughter relationship that blurs the boundaries between love and hate.

MONICA CARTER (July / August 2020)

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