

Zoli
Colum McCann

About the Book

Zoli is the story of a Gypsy woman exiled for betraying her people: the novel begins in Czechoslovakia in the early 1930s when Zoli, a young Roma girl, is six years old. The fascist Hlinka guards had driven most of her people out onto the frozen lake and forced them to stay there until the spring, when the ice cracked and everyone drowned - Zoli's parents, brothers and sisters. Zoli teaches herself to read and write and becomes a singer, a privileged position in a Gypsy company as they are viewed as the guardians of Gypsy tradition. Zoli is different because she secretly writes down some of her songs. With the rise of the Nazis, the suppression of the Gypsies intensifies. The war ends when Zoli is 16 and with the spread of socialism, the Roma are suddenly regarded as 'comrades' again. Zoli meets Stephen Swann, a man she will have a passionate affair with, but who will also betray her. He persuades Zoli to publish some of her work. But when the government try to use Zoli to help them in their plan to 'settle' Gypsies, her community turns against her. They condemn her to 'Pollution for Life', which means she is exiled forever. She begins a journey that will eventually lead her to Italy and a new life. *Zoli* is based very loosely on the true story of the Gypsy poet, Papusza, who was sentenced to a Life of Pollution by her fellow Roma when a Polish intellectual published her poems.

Discussion Questions

Please note that some of the discussion points below may act as spoilers for the book's content.

1. What is a Gypsy to you?
2. 'No act is too shallow so long as we give it a decent name.' Swann betrays Zoli by turning on the presses; but how can the broadcasting of art ever be a betrayal?
3. 'Both places at once, radio and road, impossible alongside one another.' How can old traditions survive in the modern world?

4. Is Zoli a poet or a singer? Or is it the same thing?
5. 'That was my first lessons about the west – they do not ask twice. You should always say yes.' Zoli and her world are very eastern European. How has the author realised their foreignness for a western reader?
6. 'One always loves what is left behind.' Is our view of Gypsy life solely based on some sentimental folk memory? Will ignorance prevent the embracing of true cultural diversity?
7. 'I still call myself black even though I have rolled around in flour.' What do you understand Zoli to mean by this?
8. 'I have arrived in Paris so many times, she thinks, and non of them ever like this.' Is a place ever what you imagine it to be? Can it ever be?
9. 'She surmises that the man sends the flowers to himself, and it seems to her not so much a sadness as a triumph, sending flowers to his own bedside.' Do you agree with Zoli, or can you at least see why she thinks it a triumph?

You can use HMD resources to find out more about the victims of Nazi persecution including the Roma and Sinti (<http://www.hmd.org.uk/genocides/victims-of-nazi-hatred/>), Amalie Schiach – a Gypsy girl who survived Auschwitz-Birkenau (<http://www.hmd.org.uk/files/1207564770-110.pdf>) and the Bock Family, a Gypsy family who have suffered under Nazi persecution and more contemporary discrimination (<http://www.hmd.org.uk/resources/item/288/>).