



The Secrets We Kept

Lara Prescott



Book Club Discussion Notes

Author Background

Lara received her MFA from the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas. Her debut novel, *The Secrets We Kept*, was an instant NYT bestseller, a Hello Sunshine x Reese Witherspoon Book Club pick, an Edgar Award nominee for Best First Fiction, a Barnes & Noble Discover Pick, and winner of 2019 Writers' League of Texas Book Award in Fiction. It has been translated into 30 languages and is being adapted for television by The Ink Factory and Marc Platt Productions. She lives in coastal New Hampshire with her family.

Book Summary

Secretaries turned spies, love and duty, and sacrifice—inspired by the true story of the CIA plot to infiltrate the hearts and minds of Soviet Russia, not with propaganda, but with the greatest love story of the twentieth century: Doctor Zhivago.

At the height of the Cold War, two secretaries are pulled out of the typing pool at the CIA and given the assignment of a lifetime. Their mission: to smuggle Doctor Zhivago out of the USSR, where no one dare publish it, and help Pasternak's magnum opus make its way into print around the world. Glamorous and sophisticated Sally Forrester is a seasoned spy who has honed her gift for deceit all over the world--using her magnetism and charm to pry secrets out of powerful men. Irina is a complete novice, and under Sally's tutelage quickly learns how to blend in, make drops, and invisibly ferry classified documents.

The Secrets We Kept combines a legendary literary love story—the decades-long affair between Pasternak and his mistress and muse, Olga Ivinskaya, who inspired Zhivago's heroine, Lara—with a narrative about two women empowered to lead lives of extraordinary intrigue and risk. Told with soaring emotional intensity and captivating historical detail, this is an unforgettable debut: a celebration of the powerful belief that a work of art can change the world.

Discussion Questions

- ❖ Compare the way the men and women in the book go about their work of secret-keeping. How do societal gender roles determine who does what and who is acknowledged for their work in public?
- ❖ For the main women in the book secret-keeping incurs different punishments and rewards. Who do you think suffers and sacrifices the most?
- ❖ Throughout the book, we read of Olga's unsent letters to one of her interrogators in the prison. Were you surprised by her loyalty to him despite her immense suffering?
- ❖ Sally describes herself as having "one of those faces..." (63). How do she and the other women in the book transform themselves to keep so many secrets? How are these guises reflected in the structure of the novel itself?
- ❖ Have you read *Doctor Zhivago*? If so, what elements of that love story do you see recurring in *The Secrets We Kept*?
- ❖ Did you agree with Boris's decisions first to share the novel with the Italian publisher, and then decline the Nobel Prize? Why or why not?
- ❖ Discuss how taboo influences the main love affairs in the book. Does any character find true satisfaction or happiness in traditional romantic arrangements and how do these relationships contribute to the theme of secrecy in the novel?
- ❖ Olga's children are both victims of their mother's choices in love and politics. How does she navigate her identity as a woman and a mother, and the obligations and desires that come with it?
- ❖ Discuss the author's choices to use first-person, second person, and third-person narrators for different chapters in the book. What do those choices suggest about the relative importance of the characters, and how close she wants us to get to them?

References

- ❖ Lara Prescott - <https://www.laraprescott.com/>
- ❖ Penguin Random House - <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/603995/the-secrets-we-kept-by-lara-prescott/9780525566106/readers-guide/>