

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Lara Prescott is the author of *The Secrets We Kept*, an instant *New York Times* bestseller and a Hello Sunshine x Reese Witherspoon Book Club Pick. *The Secrets We Kept* was an Edgar Award nominee for Best First Fiction, winner of the 2020 Macavity Award for Best Historical Mystery, and winner of 2019 Writers' League of Texas Book Award in Fiction. *The Secrets We Kept* is Lara's debut novel and will be translated into over 30 languages and adapted for television by The Ink Factory and Marc Platt Productions.

Lara received her MFA from the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas. She studied political science at American University in Washington, D.C. and international development in Namibia and South Africa. Prior to writing fiction, Lara worked as a political campaign consultant.

Lara's writing has appeared in *The Southern Review*, *The Hudson Review*, *Crazyhorse*, and more. She lives in Portsmouth, NH with her husband, son, cats, and dog.

- Author's website

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. 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? In your opinion, do the men or women wield more power?
2. For the main women in the book—Olga, Irina, and Sally—secret-keeping incurs different punishments and rewards. Who do you think suffers and sacrifices the most? Who winds up most “successful”?
3. Throughout the book, we read of Olga's unsent letters to one of her interrogators in the Gulag, the prison where she's sent for her association with Boris Pasternak. Were you surprised by her loyalty to him in spite of the immense suffering she endures? How, in her own way, does she use those letters to express the kind of truth about love and oppression that Boris does in his novel?
4. Sally describes herself as having “one of those faces—the wide eyes, the ready smile that suggested I was an open book, someone who had no secrets to keep, and if she did, wouldn't be able to keep them anyway” (63). How do she and the other women in the book transform themselves in order to keep so many secrets? How

are these guises reflected in the structure of the novel itself? Consider the changing first-person points of view and the names of the chapters.

5. Major historical events, including Stalin's death and the launch of Sputnik, are recalled through the eyes of the characters in highly charged environments. If you lived through these events yourself, how did their depiction in the novel impact your understanding of them? If you didn't, how did their depiction shed light on what it was like to experience them first-hand?
6. Have you read *Doctor Zhivago*? If so, what elements of that love story do you see recurring in *The Secrets We Kept*? And even if you haven't read it, were you able to glean how the balance of political commentary and romance contributed to the stir it caused in the world at the time of its publication?
7. 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?
8. Although Irina believed she failed her interview for the typist job, she explains that "they [had] seen something in me that I hadn't seen myself . . . For the first time in my life, I felt as if I had a greater purpose, not just a job. That night, something unlocked in me—a hidden power I never knew I had" (116). Do you believe she uses this power for good? Do you think she came away from her position grateful for the power she discovered?
9. The chapters narrated by the typists form a kind of Greek chorus anchoring the book in their shared experience—a collective point of view that's both inside and outside the deepest truths of the CIA. Of the course of the novel, how do the limits of their knowledge manifest themselves? What might this suggest about the nature of truth itself, and how complete it can really be? What is the hierarchy of secrecy inside and outside the Agency?
10. Sally states that becoming someone else for her work, that taking on a given persona is "the best part . . . [But] to become someone else, you have to want to lose yourself in the first place" (186). How does she embody this desire to erase a former identity, and who else in the book shares this feeling?
11. Describe Teddy's attraction to Irina and to his job at the Agency. Did you get the impression that he really knew what he wanted out of his life? How are his passions for literature (and Russian literature in particular) satisfied or disappointed by what unfolds during the course of the novel?
12. Discuss how taboo influences the main love affairs in the book. Does any character find true satisfaction or happiness in traditional romantic arrangements (namely, heterosexual marriage), and how do these relationships contribute to the theme of secrecy in the novel?
13. Olga's children, Ira and Mitya, 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? Would you have made the same choices she did when it came to staying with Boris? Consider her recognition that "I thought of my children knowing, so young, that love sometimes isn't enough" (243).

14. 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?
15. "We go on because that's what we have to do," Olga tells Boris when he is contemplating suicide (294). How do the events of the novel speak to this kind of endurance? Who takes up the charge to go on, and who isn't able to?
16. Describe your experience of reading about the dissemination of Doctor Zhivago at the World's Fair. What emotions and physical feelings came up as this dangerous property was passed from hand to hand? If you were living in the time of the novel, do you think you would have sought it out knowing the implications of reading it?
17. Discuss a book, film, piece of music, or other art that has profoundly shaped your experience of current events at any point in your life in the way Doctor Zhivago does for the characters. How did that piece reflect back to you concerns about how you lived your life at the time? Did it change your behaviors or lifestyle at all?

- <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/603995/the-secrets-we-kept-by-lara-prescott/9780525566106/readers-guide/>

BOOK REVIEWS

Library Journal

/ Starred Review */* DEBUT Boris Pasternak's masterpiece, *Doctor Zhivago*, banned in the Soviet Union, was smuggled out to an Italian publisher in 1957, when the book became a literary sensation in the West. In the United States, the work became a propaganda tool for the CIA. Prescott's exciting novel begins with the women who work in the agency's typing pool. Among these "gals" in Washington ("The West") are the young Russian American Irina and the sophisticated Sally, whose secretarial careers have turned into something a great deal more dangerous. Back in Moscow ("The East"), historical characters include Pasternak himself and his longtime lover Olga, the inspiration for Lara in his novel. Olga pays the highest price, spending years in the Gulag, a reminder of just how grim the Soviet years were. This rich and well-researched narrative has an almost epic sweep, with alternating dramatic plots involving spies and espionage, many fascinating characters (both historical and fictional) from East and West, and a gifted writer and storyteller to tie it all together. VERDICT For a debut novelist, Prescott writes with astonishing assurance, enthralling readers with tales of secret agents and intrigue, love, and betrayal. Highly recommended. [See Prepub Alert, 3/4/19.] --Leslie Patterson (Reviewed 08/01/2019) (Library Journal, vol 144, issue 7, p90)

Publisher's Weekly

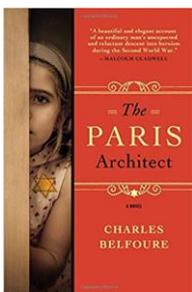
/ Starred Review */* Prescott's triumphant debut offers a fresh perspective on women employed by the CIA during the 1950s and their role in disseminating into the Soviet Union copies of *Dr. Zhivago*, Boris Pasternak's banned masterpiece. In 1956, American-born Irina Drozdova gets a job at the CIA ostensibly as a typist but is destined for fieldwork. Former OSS agent Sally Forrester trains Irina in spycraft. Meanwhile, inside the Soviet Union, Boris Pasternak's lover, Olga Vsevolodovna, is interrogated about Pasternak's work in progress, *Dr. Zhivago*. After three years in a prison camp, she reunites with Pasternak, who, unable to publish in the Soviet Union, entrusts his novel to an Italian publisher's representative. Back in Washington, Irina, now engaged to a male agent but in love with Sally,

seeks assignment overseas. Dressed as a nun, she places copies of Dr. Zhivago, printed in the original Russian for the CIA, into the hands of Soviet citizens visiting the Vienna World's Fair. Through lucid images and vibrant storytelling, Prescott creates an edgy postfeminist vision of the Cold War, encompassing Sputnik to glasnost, typing pool to gulag, for a smart, lively page-turner. This debut shines as spy story, publication thriller, and historical romance with a twist. (Sept.) --Staff (Reviewed 07/01/2019) (Publishers Weekly, vol 266, issue 26, p)

Kirkus Reviews

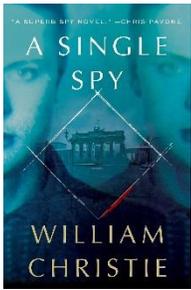
/ Starred Review */* Inspired by the true story of the role of Dr. Zhivago in the Cold War: a novel of espionage in the West, resistance in the East, and grand passions on both sides. "We typed a hundred words a minute and never missed a syllable... Our fingers flew across the keys. Our clacking was constant. We'd pause only to answer the phone or to take a drag of a cigarette; some of us managed to master both without missing a beat." Prescott's debut features three individual heroines and one collective one—the typing pool at the Agency (the then relatively new CIA), which acts as a smart, snappy Greek chorus as the action of the novel progresses, also providing delightful description and commentary on D.C. life in the 1950s. The other three are Irina, a young Russian American who is hired despite her slow typing because other tasks are planned for her; Sally, an experienced spy who is charged with training Irina and ends up falling madly in love with her; and Olga, the real-life mistress of Boris Pasternak, whose devotion to the married author sent her twice to the gulag and dwarfed everything else in her life, including her two children. Well-researched and cleverly constructed, the novel shifts back and forth between the Soviet Union and Washington, beginning with Olga's first arrest in 1949—"When the men in the black suits came, my daughter offered them tea"—and moving through the smuggling of the Soviet-suppressed manuscript of Dr. Zhivago out of Russia all the way up to the release of the film version in 1965. Despite the passionate avowals and heroics, the love affair of Olga and Boris never quite catches fire. But the Western portions of the book—the D.C. gossip, the details of spy training, and the lesbian affair—really sing. An intriguing and little-known chapter of literary history is brought to life with brio. (Kirkus Reviews, July 1, 2019)

READALIKES



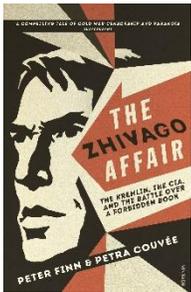
***The Paris Architect* by Charles Belfoure**

In 1942 Paris, gifted architect Lucien Bernard accepts a commission that will bring him a great deal of money and maybe get him killed. But if he's clever enough, he'll avoid any trouble. All Lucien has to do is design a secret hiding place for a wealthy Jewish man, a space so invisible that even the most determined German officer won't find it. He sorely needs the money, and outwitting the Nazis who have occupied his beloved city is a challenge he can't resist. But when one of his hiding spaces fails horribly, and the problem of where to hide a Jew becomes personal, Lucien can no longer ignore what's at stake. *The Paris Architect* asks us to consider what we owe each other, and just how far we'll go to make things right.



***A Single Spy* by William Christie**

This World War II-era tale of double-crossing follows an Azerbaijani thief who became a **spy** on pain of death. Trained by Soviet intelligence, he's sent undercover into Nazi Germany, where he joins the intelligence service and is tasked with pulling off a stunning assassination. Inspired by the theoretical assassination of Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill, lots of historical detail and a complex protagonist who just wants to save his own skin



***The Zhivago Affair* by Peter Finn**

Drawing on newly declassified government files, this is the dramatic story of how a forbidden book in the Soviet Union became a secret CIA weapon in the ideological battle between East and West. In *The Zhivago Affair*, Peter Finn and Petra Couvee bring us intimately close to a charming, passionate, and complex artist. First to obtain CIA files providing concrete proof of the agency's involvement, the authors give us a literary thriller that takes us back to a fascinating period of the Cold War--to a time when literature had the power to stir the world.