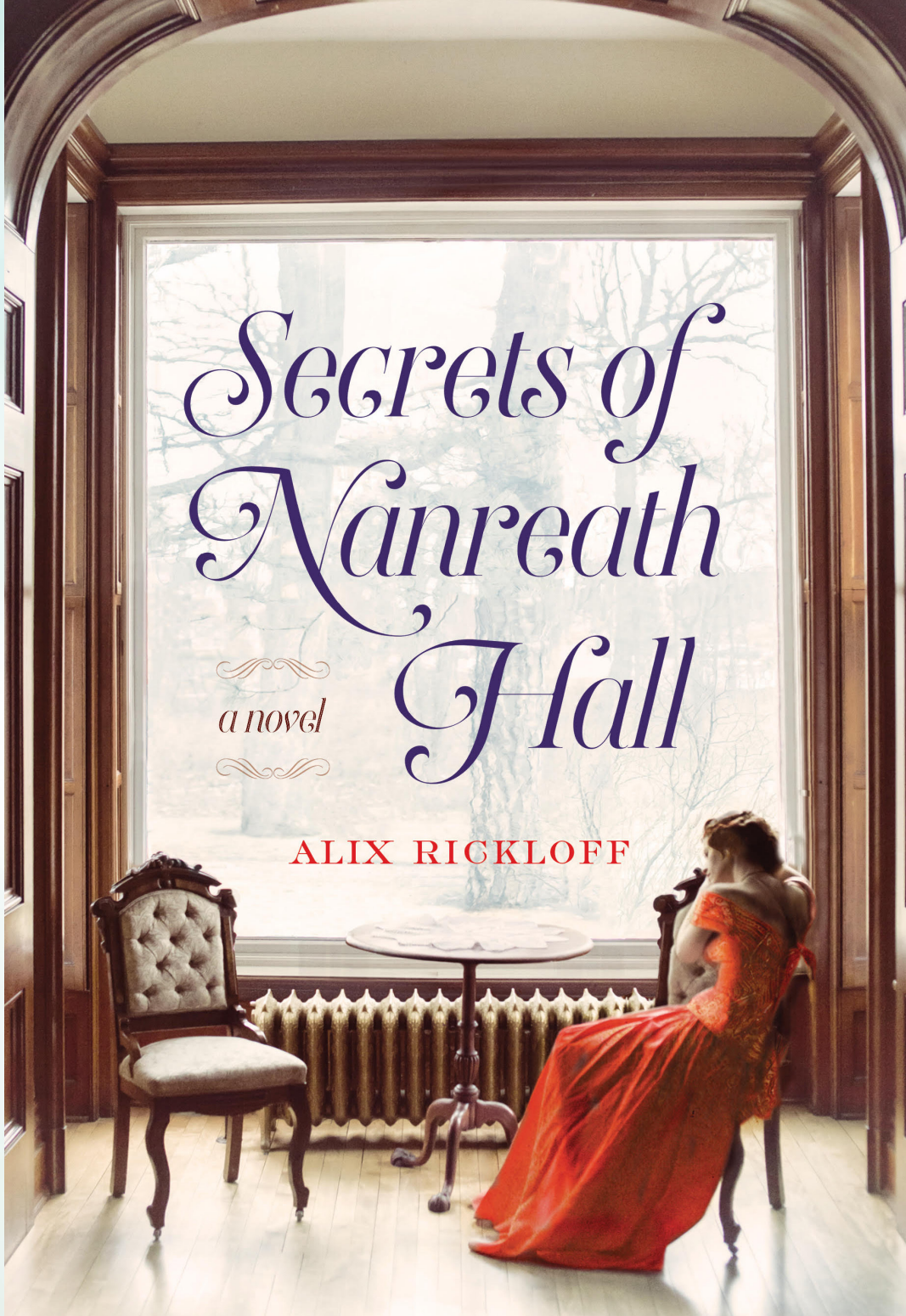


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Book Club Guide

Secrets of Nanreath Hall



Dear Readers

I hope you enjoy the Book Club Guide for SECRETS OF NANREATH HALL. I've included an author's note that includes the story of how I came to be inspired to write the book. There are also some discussion questions to get your group started as well as some fantastic recipes for wartime inspired cocktails and nibbles that would pass the strictest ration board. While there are loads of wartime novels out there for those who wish to read more, I've offered a few of my all-time favorites as well as a few non-fiction titles to send you down the rabbit hole, so pull up a chair, put on some Andrews Sisters or Glenn Miller to get you "In the Mood" and have fun!

Enjoy and happy reading!

Alix



Author's Note

Secrets of Nanreath Hall, my debut historical fiction novel, began as a serendipitous collision of circumstance and inspiration.

I'd been interested in the 1940's ever since I watched Greer Garson in *Mrs. Miniver* back in college. I started reading military histories, social memoirs, collected letters, journalistic accounts, and novels set during the era. But for twenty plus years and nine plus books, it remained a side interest.

Then I was asked if I wanted to set a book during this tumultuous time period. It was a dream come true and, better yet, I already had the seeds of an idea. You see, I'd been watching a certain popular BBC series set on a fictional British country estate and, while the adults' melodramas kept me glued to my set, it was the seldom-seen children on the show that sparked my writer curiosity.

The fatherless heir to an earldom. The daughter of a scandalous elopement. They screamed out for stories of their own.

Immediately, I began to wonder who these characters were, how their lives might have been shaped by their contrasting upbringings, and how WWII would have affected them as young adults.

When the story opens on the eve of WWI, Nanreath Hall is the gracious and elegant country home of a well-heeled aristocrat, but during the course of the book, we see the house and the family living there begin to fade from their original glory. A second war has come and the house, like so many throughout Great Britain, has been conscripted by the government.

While Nanreath Hall has been turned into a military hospital, other great country houses were used as government offices, billets for soldiers and officers, schools, training facilities, and in some cases even prisoner of war camps. At the end of the war, some of these homes were returned to the families. Others, either too damaged during the conscription or too expensive to repair and maintain, were abandoned.

Anna Trenowyth is assigned as a VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) nurse, to Nanreath Hall, setting the story in motion.

The VAD founded in 1909 with help from the Red Cross came into its own during WW1 when nearly 40,000 women volunteered as ambulance drivers and in hospitals throughout the Western Front, as well as convalescent settings in England. By WW2, they were a well-established group whose service augmented the professional nursing staff (both civilian and military) at home and abroad. Their most famous member was Vera Brittain who wrote the bestselling memoir *Testament of Youth* about her wartime experiences, but Agatha Christie, Enid Bagnold, and E.M. Delafield all served as VAD during the wars.

While Simon Halliday is completely fictional, his boss, the artist Balasz, is loosely based on famous Society portraitist Philip de Laszlo. Hungarian-born De Laszlo was known for his many paintings of European royalty and aristocrats. Despite being showered with honors and marrying into the wealthy Guinness family, de Laszlo was interned for over a year during WWI, much like his fictional counterpart. This suspicion of foreigners extended to much of the German population living and working in England.

Their shops and restaurants were vandalized, and many were sent without cause to internment camps in northern Scotland where poor conditions and facilities often resulted in illness and injury.

While I took some authorial liberties, the Byam Shaw School of Art where Kitty eventually ends up is a real place. The art school founded in 1910 by Byam Shaw and Vicat Cole was located in Campden Street. From the beginning, the school employed female staff, including Mrs. Shaw and attracted many female students so it would have been a perfect spot for Kitty to fulfill her dreams of becoming an artist.

The story of Anna and Kitty blossomed from what-if questions arising from a binge-worthy British melodrama, taking twists and turns I'd never envisaged when I first sat down to write. By the time I typed "The End" it grew to encompass two wars and two women—a mother and a daughter, and the country house that connects their stories.



Discussion Questions

1. The book opens with Kitty looking back on her life and her choices. Did your knowledge of how her story ultimately ends affect how you felt as you read?

2. Anna's story begins in late 1940 when England stood alone against Germany and an attempted invasion seemed inevitable. Despite this threat, citizens never panicked. How would you have felt under a similar situation? Would you have assisted in the defense of your country? In what way?

3. From the VAD's to the WVS, the Land Girls to the WAAF, there are references throughout the book to the full-scale mobilization of England's civilian female population. After the war's end, most of these women returned to their homes and families. Do you think it was difficult for them to go back to the way things were after such valuable contributions? Do you think the war was a factor in the rise of feminism that came in later decades?

4. The Hungarian-born artist Balázs was interned during WWI along with thousands of others enemy nationals, including many British citizens of German descent. This same hysteria struck again during WWII when thousands of Italian, German, and, in the US, Japanese citizens, were interned. Do you believe they were justified in their actions? Do you see it ever happening again?

5. Lady Boxley tells Anna "A father is the man who makes you the person you are, not the man who simply makes you." (pg 307) Do you think she was referring to Anna's situation or Hugh's? Or both?

6. Anna thinks she should tell Hugh the truth about his paternity. Tony and Lady Boxley disagree. What would you do if faced with that decision? Why?

7. Secrets are at the heart of both stories from Anna's white lie when she first meets Hugh to the heartbreaking betrayals that end up tainting the lives of two generations. Have you ever kept a secret? Have you ever had someone keep a secret from you?

8. William followed the rules while Kitty followed her heart? Neither ended with what they wanted. Who made the better choice? Why?

Discussion Questions

9. Do you feel Simon's deception was justified since he acted out of love for Kitty or do his actions make him a villain?

10. Anna wears a locket with her parents' pictures in it. Do you have a favorite memento you carry all the time? What is it? What does it mean to you?

11. Sister Murphy is rarely seen and speaks only a few times yet she is one of the most vivid characters in the book. How is her personality conveyed when she is so rarely part of the main action? Would you have liked to have seen more or less of her?

12. Both Anna and Hugh are affected by their wartime battle experiences. How do each of them cope with the trauma? In what ways are their strategies similar? In what ways are they different?

13. Do you know anyone who served during WWII, either in the military or as a civilian volunteer? How did the war affect them?

14. Do you believe the Lady Boxley of Kitty's story acts out of love for Hugh or self-interest? What about the Lady Boxley of Anna's story? What are some examples in both cases that further your argument?

15. Which character did you most identify with? Which time period drew you in more deeply? What will you most remember about this story?



Drinks & treats

Wartime-inspired treats to enjoy at your next book club



Sidecar

(Invented around WWI, it's said to have been created for a customer who arrived at the bar on a motorcycle)

- 1 ½ oz cognac
- ¾ oz orange liqueur
- ¾ oz lemon juice

1. Add the cognac, liqueur, and lemon juice to a shaker with ice. Strain into a highball glass over fresh ice.
2. Strain into a glass.
3. Garnish with an orange twist.

Suffering Bastard

(This cocktail began as a hangover cure for WWII troops stationed in Egypt in 1942.)

- 1 oz bourbon
- 1 oz dry gin
- ½ oz lime juice
- 2 dashes Angostura bitters
- Ginger beer
- Mint sprig

1. Add the bourbon, gin, lime juice, and bitters to a shaker with ice and shake until chilled
2. Strain into a glass with ice.
3. Top with ginger beer.
4. Garnish with mint sprig.

Drinks & treats

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French 75

(Named after the 75 millimeter field gun used by the French during WWI, it first appeared in cocktail books around 1927 on a motorcycle)

- 1 oz gin
- ½ oz lemon juice
- ½ oz simple syrup
- 3 oz champagne
- Lemon twist

1. Add gin, lemon juice, and simple syrup to a shaker with ice and shake until chilled. Strain into a glass.
2. Strain into champagne flute.
3. Top with champagne.
4. Garnish with lemon twist.

Cucumber and butter tea sandwiches

- 1 english cucumber unpeeled
- ¼ cup unsalted butter, softened
- Salt & Pepper
- 10 slices of white bread cut thin, crusts off

1. Cut cucumber into thin slices. Lay on paper towel to drain
2. Spread butter on bread slices. Sprinkle with salt and pepper taste.
3. Layer overlapping cucumber slices on ½ of the bread and top with other ½ of bread
4. Cut into quarters



Wartime Scones

- 16 oz flour
- 2 oz butter
- 2 oz sultanas
- Pinch of salt
- 2 tsp of baking powder
- ¼ pint milk
- 2 oz sugar

1. Mix the flour, salt, and baking powder.
2. Rub mixture into the butter
3. Add sugar and sultanas and make into a stiff dough with the milk
4. Roll out about 1" thick and cut into rounds
5. Brush tops with milk
6. Bake at 475 degrees for 20 minutes
7. Serve with jam

Want to read more?

Here are some non-fiction titles to dig deeper into both wars as well as the art scene in pre-war London. I've also added a few of my favorite novels from both eras.

Testament of Youth by Vera Brittain

Bohemian London by Nick Rennison

The Miracle of Dunkirk by Walter Lord

Mrs. Miniver by Jan Struther

Edith Pargeter's World War II trilogy

The War At Home series by Cynthia Harrod-Eagles



Author Bio

Critically acclaimed author of historical fiction, Alix Rickloff's family tree includes a knight who fought during the Wars of the Roses (his brass rubbing hangs in her dining room) and a soldier who sided with Charles I during the English Civil War (hence the family's hasty emigration to America). With inspiration like that, what else could she do but start writing her own stories? She lives in Maryland in a house that's seen its own share of history so when she's not writing, she can usually be found trying to keep it from falling down. *THE WAY TO LONDON* is her latest release.