



City of Shadows

By Ariana Franklin
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Introduction

1920s Berlin. The end of the Great War has left the once-proud city, along with much of Germany, in financial and psychological ruin, crippled by economic depression, rampant inflation and a looming sense of hopelessness and despair. In this turbulent era, when ensuring one's survival is the name of the game, a strong-willed Russian-Jewish émigré named Esther Solomonova finds herself enmeshed in Berlin's teeming underworld—the only place she can reliably find work. In the employ of corrupt Russian "Prince" Nicolai Potrovskov, Esther is dragged into an audacious moneymaking ploy: the "discovery" in a German asylum of the Russian grand duchess Anastasia, whom Prince Nick means to use as a conduit to the Romanov riches rumored to be waiting for the rightful heirs.

As *City of Shadows* unfolds, Esther is left to reluctantly watch over and steward the mysterious, mute and possibly crazy Anna Anderson, the "long-lost Grand Duchess." However, it soon becomes apparent that a shadowy killer is also pursuing the mystery woman, and Esther is tossed into a dangerous game of cat-and-mouse as the killer begins to pick off those close to her in increasingly brutal ways. Soon the quest to discover Anna's true identity, and why this killer is so bent on silencing her, hovers over every aspect of Esther's life. Set against the backdrop of what would soon become the madness of Nazi Germany, *City of Shadows* clearly evokes the fear and confusion of a terrible era—and brings together the mystery of Anastasia and the change in an angry and defeated nation.

Questions for Discussion

1. The entire book is told from the perspective of Esther and Inspector Schmidt. How do you think the story would have differed (if at all) if any of the other characters' perspectives had been used? Did you find Esther and Schmidt to be reliable, accurate narrators, especially as observers of the changing Germany around them?
2. The idea that people simply "want to believe" that the Grand Duchess Anastasia survived the execution of her family provides much of Prince Nick's justification for his scheme with Anna. Did you see this hope, this desire to believe in something so implausible, as a human virtue or a weakness? How does it compare with the rising public support for the National Socialist movement within the community at large?
3. Compare the supposedly deviant characters that populate Prince Nick's decadent Berlin to the fascist youths in the relatively "clean" SA movement growing in Germany. How does the author depict these two groups and what qualities seem to qualify as "moral" in this turbulent era? In what ways were these two groups similar to each other?
4. Consider the issue of post-war identity in this novel, both on a personal and national level. How does identity (and how it could be completely reshaped and reinvented in this era) influence, both for bad and for good, the actions of the individual characters in the book?
5. In the prologue of the book, we get a very brief glimpse of Anna and R.G.'s chance meeting at the Landwehr Canal. The devastating meeting of past and present in that one moment sets off the calamitous events that make up the rest of the book. What other examples of past-meeting-present occur throughout the book and what consequences result from these encounters?
6. What was your impression of Prince Nick? Did he strike you as a sympathetic character or a victimizer who simply exploited the poor and desperate? Did you think he actually believed that Anna was, in fact, Anastasia?
7. Why do you think Schmidt was so devoted to capturing the mysterious R.G. alive, even though he is aware of the greater threats rising around him? Do you think he should have taken more care to ensure his and Esther's safety?
8. At one point in the book, Esther advises Anna to avoid being a fraud, to "be content with being ordinary." Is this a principle that Esther applied to her own life? By the book's conclusion, did you think that she had successfully embraced her new life or was she destined to be haunted by her past?
9. Assuming that Esther and Schmidt survived their flight from Germany, what do you think happened to them? Do you think they stayed together? What kind of life would they have together?
10. How did the book's final twist regarding Esther's past change your perception of both Esther and Anna?

About the Author

Ariana Franklin is a former Fleet Street reporter who lives in Hertfordshire, England.