Reading Group Kit

Reading Group Guide

1. At the start of the book, Ruth tells the reader: "What I have done this summer, I have done to repay a debt...to all who came before me and saved me without my knowing it." Who is she speaking of? How does she ultimately repay them?

2. Ruth tells the reader, "Nothing ever stays the same, does it? The accumulation of age and experience changes us daily. If it doesn't, you'd better worry." Do you agree? How did age and experience change Ruth or Iris or Sasha?

3. Did Iris make the right decision to stay in Rome and marry Sasha instead of going back to America with her sister? Would you have done the same? Was Ruth truly acting in Iris's best interests when she tried to separate Sasha and Iris or did she have other motives?

4. Did the death of Ruth and Iris's father by suicide when they were children influence who they became as adults? How did it affect their sisterhood?

5. What do you make of Iris and Sasha's marriage? What about Iris's relationship with Philip? Would you have gone to Moscow with Sasha or stayed in England with Philip?

6. At the beginning of the book we learn that Lyudmila Ivanova "has one faith—the Communist state. Everything else falls sacrifice to this one pure idea, even herself." Does her faith ever change? How does she compare to Sasha Digby, who is also willing to sacrifice everything for his Communist ideals?

7. Were you surprised to discover Iris's true role at the end of the novel? When Iris reflects that "... bravery is woven from all kinds of different fabric, and maybe hers is actually the more tough, the more durable", do you agree?

8. Did you recognize characters from Beatriz Williams's other novels in this story? Were there any you were surprised or excited to rediscover?

9. What do you think ultimately happens to these characters in the years after this story ends? What becomes of Sasha, of Iris and Philip, and of Ruth? What kind of future do you see for them as the Cold War continues, and after it ends?

A VIDEO MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR

MEET BEATRIZ

Beatriz Williams is the bestselling author of thirteen novels, including *Her Last Flight*, *The Summer Wives*, and *The Golden Hour*, as well as *All the Ways We Said Goodbye*, cowritten with Lauren Willig and Karen White. A native of Seattle, she graduated from Stanford University and earned an MBA in finance from Columbia University. She lives with her husband and four children near the Connecticut shore, where she divides her time between writing and laundry.

OUR WOMAN IN MOSCOW: THE STORY BEHIND THE BOOK

On a Friday evening at the end of May 1951, after celebrating his thirty-eighth birthday with a ham supper, British diplomat Donald Maclean kissed his pregnant wife Melinda and his two sons goodbye and drove from his comfortable suburban home to Southampton, England, where he boarded a weekend pleasure cruise with his friend and Cambridge contemporary, Guy Burgess, and defected to the Soviet Union.

So began the decades-long unraveling of the Cambridge Five, the most notorious espionage ring in British history and the basis of countless retellings in Cold War spy fiction and nonfiction alike. Recruited straight out of university by a Soviet intelligence service cunningly aware of the British knack for channeling promising young men into positions of power and influence, Maclean—along with fellow agents Burgess, John Cairncross, Anthony Blunt, and the infamous Kim Philby—systematically drained the West of its most vital secrets from the middle of the 1930s until a postwar FBI decryption operation began to dig out the moles.

While the United States unmasked its own share of Cold War traitors—Alger Hiss and the Rosenbergs come immediately to mind—the story of the Cambridge Five is less familiar on this side of the Atlantic than in Great Britain, where the defections of Burgess and Maclean and eventually Philby are woven into the fabric of postwar culture. The more I dug into their stories, the more fascinated I became by the complex psychology of each spy—the reasons they betrayed the very establishment that had nurtured them, their continued ideological loyalty in the face of communism's brutal reality, the torment of leading a double life—and, most marvelous of all, how these men remained undetected for so long inside a privileged caste that simply refused to believe one of their own could betray them. How willfully blind were their friends and colleagues, really? And how did their families cope with and enable their treason and its calamitous consequences?

Of course, the United States has its own privileged caste—Erik Larson memorably dubbed it the Pretty Good Club in his account of prewar diplomacy in Berlin, *In the Garden of Beasts*—which presumes absolute loyalty as a condition of membership. Certainly the appeal of communism to the rising young men of the Great Depression was just as shiny in America's Ivy League as in Oxbridge. I might have made an imaginative leap in creating an American Donald Maclean in *Our Woman in Moscow*, but not into thin air. And as in real life, the wives and sisters, the mothers and secretaries, play roles untold and even unimagined by official history.

Q&A with Beatriz Williams for *OUR WOMAN IN MOSCOW*

Q: Beatriz, you've written an incredible amount of historical fiction spanning a range of time periods featuring brave women who make decisions based on duty, ambition, and heart. *Our Woman in Moscow* takes these same themes but adds in a dash of espionage. What inspired you to write about the Cold War for *Our Woman in Moscow*? What made you turn to the Cambridge Spy ring?

A: The Cold War fascinates me for so many reasons. In the first place, I came of age during the final paroxysm of the conflict between Soviet Communism and the West, so it's embedded in my own experience. Secondly, my grandfather grew up in St. Petersburg as the son of a British father and Russian mother and was forced to flee during the Bolshevik revolution in 1917—a family story that's inspired my deeply personal interest in Russia itself. Finally, in my convictions and in my writing, I am always and everywhere a passionate defender of the dignity of the human individual, and the physical, psychological, and ideological battlegrounds of the Cold War provide so much material for exploring these ideas. The Cambridge spy ring in particular combines all these elements—human beings committing terrible acts in the service of their ideals, and the devastating consequences for their own mental health and the lives of their families. At the same time, the existing Cold War literature—both fiction and nonfiction—spins this narrative almost exclusively from the perspective of male actors in a historical drama, focusing on the how and where and when of espionage. I wanted to explore why they did it, and what it did to them, and—a territory even more shadowed—how the women in their lives coped with its effects. I felt there was a larger and more human story to be told that takes place at the intersection between the political and the personal, and from the perspective of women.

Q: There are a lot of parallels between Soviet Union spies so set in their beliefs in the novel and some of the current unrest happening in our own country. How did you get into the mindset of someone so sure that betraying their country, friends, and family is the most noble path? What do you want your readers to take away from reading this novel and moving through the current landscape?

A: Over the past few years I've observed with increasing concern how passionately people on all sides have committed themselves to their political beliefs, in the same way the young Communists of the 1930s—when Stalin's extremely effective propaganda coincided with a disastrous period in the history of capitalism—became personally invested in communism. Many were disillusioned as events unfolded, but the Cambridge spies, who were all brilliantly intelligent, highly educated men, continued to justify and even double down on their ideological commitments throughout the murderous purges and the forced collectivizations, the Ukraine famine and the Nazi-Soviet pact. Why? Because communism offered you a sense of belonging to a quasi-religious movement that delivered a systemic explanation for the world around you, together with a vision for a future utopia, both of which fulfill core human emotional needs. As in a religious sect, you're willing to sacrifice everything else to your convictions, because these convictions have become essential to a personal narrative of heroic selfhood standing in moral opposition to unbelievers, and—crucially—in community with co-religionists. Through that lens, the Cambridge spies—and hundreds of other ideologically-motivated operatives—were able to view their betrayals and sabotage as noble, courageous acts in the service of humanity, despite the deadly consequences to friends, colleagues, and the millions of people living behind the Iron Curtain. You have only to glance at Twitter today to see how these ego defense mechanisms continue to manifest—in orthodoxy and denunciation, in anger and intolerance for criticism, in rationalization of contradictory facts—as the personal and the political merge inside the fragile self.

Q: What is most striking about your main characters, twin sisters Iris and Ruth, is their deep devotion to each other, even if they don't see eye to eye. Family devotion is a recurring theme in your novels, and *Our Woman in Moscow* is centered around the deepest bonds of sisterhood. Why did you write Iris and Ruth as twins? Why do these themes of family bonds run through your novels?

A: Again and again in my novels, I find myself returning to the fundamental human tension between public and private obligations, because it seems to me that our lives depend on how we resolve this dilemma. Life's greatest joys and miseries arise from our connections to other human beings, and the connections between siblings are so often the most complicated mix of all—the closer the family connection, after all, the deeper the hurt of betrayal. I created Ruth and Iris as twin sisters to raise these stakes to their highest, because *Our Woman in Moscow* is essentially a book about human relationships and human loyalty, and what happens when we're forced to choose between fidelity to our chosen beliefs and fidelity to the people we love.

Q: *Our Woman in Moscow* takes the reader on a jet-setting ride across Rome, New York, Moscow, and many other glamorous places. It's the perfect armchair travel in a time where international travel is limited! How did you choose locations? What does that research entail, especially when set in a different time period?

A: I would say that I didn't really choose the locations—the locations chose me! Like his historical model, Sasha Digby is a foreign service official posted to various high-profile American consulates as his career progresses, ending in his defection to Moscow. Donald Maclean actually met and married his American wife as the Nazis closed in on Paris in the spring of 1940—a dramatic touch any novelist would love—so I couldn't help recasting this love story in Rome, a city I've visited and loved. London has a special place in my heart, both because my father happens to be British by birth, and because my husband and I lived there for five years—in fact, the Digbys' flat in Oakwood Court was our own, and our downstairs neighbor also complained about her shaking chandeliers when our toddlers thundered down the hall! Moscow was the most challenging location for me, because I've never had the opportunity to visit, and of course the Moscow of today differs in so many respects from the Moscow of the immediate postwar Stalinist period. I relied on historical descriptions and travelers' accounts from the period, and backchecked building histories to account for renovations or location changes.

Q: The novel is not only fantastic historical fiction, but also reads like a spy thriller. Each page contains a piece of the puzzle as to why Iris vanished into thin air. How did you create such a gripping thriller in between historical detail? Were there any books or movies that helped to inspire you along the way?

A: As I began my research on the Cambridge spy ring, the story of the British Foreign Service officer Donald Maclean fascinated me deeply, particularly in glimpses of his turbulent relationship with his American wife, Melinda, and his psychological deterioration under the strain of his double life. Students of the Cambridge spy ring will immediately recognize Maclean as the model for Sasha Digby, the fictional American diplomat whose decades-long espionage for the Soviet Union sets in motion the events of *Our Woman in Moscow*, but the creative influences were various, from Hitchcock classics like *The 39 Steps* and *North by Northwest*, to the novels of John le Carré and Graham Greene, to a shattering visit to the Museum of Communism in Prague. Ultimately, I wanted to create a book that combines the narrative momentum of a spy thriller with the texture and the psychological layers of historical fiction, where the storytelling lens shifts to focus on the hidden agency of women.

Q: Ruth Macallister is smart, savvy, determined, and a woman ahead of her time. Your novels are known for having, what would be considered today, feminist women at the forefront. What is it like writing fierce leading women into a time that would not be as accepting of them?

A: When I was around eleven or twelve, my father's mother—who was born in 1916 in Kobe, Japan, married in Calcutta, raised her children in postwar England, and was to me the prototype of the quietly adventurous, bookish, globetrotting modern woman—used to say that the 1920s and 30s were "a wonderful time to be a woman…and then the 50s came, and it's as if we fell asleep!" That sense of prewar freedom followed by postwar frustration probably lurks, conscious or not, behind all my female characters, whether they're brasher sorts like Ruth or more introspective women, like Iris. I think women of the era were invigorated by a newfound freedom to pursue careers and enjoy love affairs, but on the other hand, they also experienced the physical and emotional challenges that inevitably come with freedom, and they made mistakes and suffered. I find these women fascinating to write because they have so many layers. That friction between strength and vulnerability gives them life, and my job is to portray them in such a way that the reader can perceive the truth of characterization between the lines.

Q. Much of this novel also revolves around romantic love, as Iris falls desperately in love with her eventual husband, Sasha Digby, and cuts off family to remain abroad with him. Ruth also finds herself drawn to counterintelligence agent Sumner Fox. Why do you think these stories of love and connection resonate so strongly with readers? How do you write touching stories of both falling in love and heartbreak?

A: Falling in love is such a quintessentially human experience—one that changes the way we relate to each other and to ourselves, one that heightens our engagement with the world around us and demands that we define our loyalties in clear, decisive lines. It also suggests the possibility of new life, which is another transformative experience, especially for women. For those reasons, I make no excuses for being drawn to stories that deal with romantic love, both as a writer and a reader. I don't think we need to be afraid or ashamed of romance, or to treat it like some kind of sentimental feminine weakness. Eros is real, it's natural, it drives all of us in fascinating and unexpected ways. It's the desire for life over death, for hope over fear, and it's the living heart of storytelling from Shakespeare to Austen to Verdi to Pushkin and Pasternak.

Q: What was the most difficult section to write, and what section came to you most naturally? Likewise, who was the most difficult character to write, and who came to you most naturally?

A: Absolutely the most challenging section of the book was Iris's story. Whenever I take direct inspiration from some historical figure, I find it difficult to separate the actual history from the story I want to tell—the facts tend to block my imagination. It takes some time and iteration to develop my characters as people in their own right, instead of some flat derivative of the historical figure that first inspired me. Iris and Sasha met in several different scenarios before I finally started fresh in Rome, and everything fell into place. By that time, I already had Ruth's narrative sketched out in my head, so that came more easily despite all the intense, intricate plotting that goes along with an espionage storyline. Somewhat alarmingly, though, the voice that came most naturally was that of my fictional KGB officer, Lyudmila Ivanova! About halfway through the novel, I realized I needed the perspective of the cat as well as the mice, to bring all my ideas together. Having done a fair amount of research on the Soviet intelligence services at that point, I instinctively grasped the mentality of someone who had survived and thrived in the brutal, traumatic environment of Stalinist Russia—the Soviet citizen in its most distilled form—and Lyudmila rose right from the page, her character and her moral arc perfectly clear to me from the first word.

Meet the Sisters

Ruth Macallister

Tall, confident, naturally athletic, Ruth relishes her role as the star player, the glamorous twin, the fearless leader. After the deaths of their parents, she acts as a surrogate parent for Iris; in her job as de facto head of New York's most prestigious modeling agency, she delights in managing the careers (and the lives) of her clients. But Ruth's aplomb masks a warm and often vulnerable heart. A devastating first love affair leaves her unwilling to commit herself again, and when Iris chooses her own lover over Ruth, the estrangement between the sisters endures for more than a decade. Still, Ruth's fierce loyalty draws her back to rescue the twin she's always tried to protect and to shield from the harsh realities of life.

Iris Macallister Digby

Small, soft, artistic, Iris prefers to let others take charge of everyday matters, but when she sets her heart on something, she's quietly invincible. Hers is the bravery of endurance. A natural observer, Iris notices and remembers every detail—a skill that will make her especially effective in the career that's thrust upon her. Iris understands others far more intuitively than they understand her. Her empathy and her sensitive, romantic heart lead her into trouble, but they also reap rich spiritual rewards, if only she lives long enough to enjoy them.

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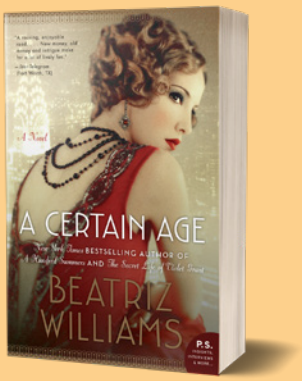

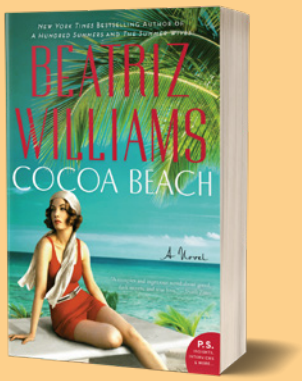

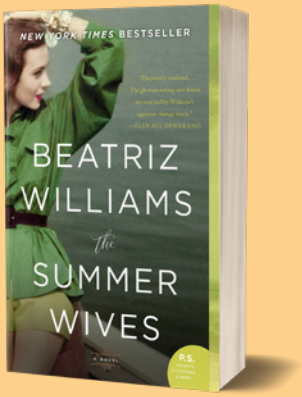

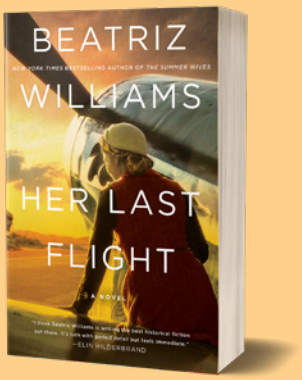

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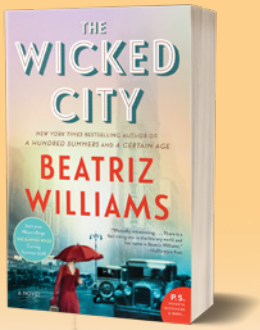

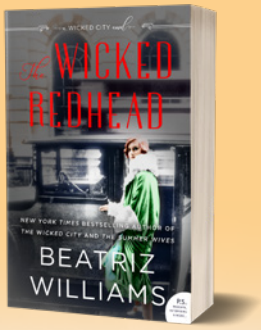

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