

Daughters of the Occupation

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Introduction

Inspired by true events in World War II Latvia, an emotionally charged novel of sacrifice, trauma, resilience, and survival, as witnessed by three generations of women.

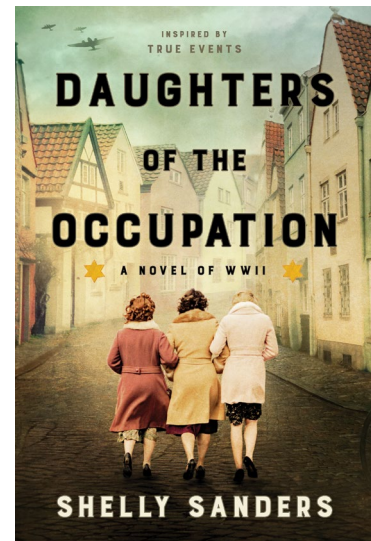
On one extraordinary day in 1940, Miriam Talan's comfortable life is shattered. While she gives birth to her second child, a son she and her husband, Max, name Monya, the Soviets invade the Baltic state of Latvia and occupy the capital city of Riga, her home. Because the Talans are Jewish, the Soviets confiscate Max's business and the family's house and bank accounts, leaving them with nothing.

Then, the Nazis arrive. They kill Max and begin to round up Jews. Fearing for her newborn son and her young daughter, Ilana, Miriam asks her loyal housekeeper to hide them and conceal their Jewish roots to keep them safe until the savagery ends.

Three decades later, in Chicago, 24-year-old Sarah Byrne is mourning the untimely death of her mother, Ilana. Sarah's estranged grandmother, Miriam, attends the funeral, opening the door to shocking family secrets. Sarah probes Miriam for information about the past, but it is only when Miriam is in the hospital, delirious with fever, that she begs Sarah to find the son she left behind in Latvia.

Traveling to the Soviet satellite state, Sarah begins her search with the help of Roger, a charismatic Russian-speaking professor. But as they come closer to the truth, she realizes her quest may have disastrous consequences.

A magnificent, emotionally powerful story of family and the lingering devastation of war, *The Daughters of the Occupation* explores how trauma is passed down in families and illuminates the strength and grace that can be shared by generations.



Questions for Discussion

1. After reading the Author's Note, and finding that this novel is inspired by the author's ancestors, how did your views of the characters and events change? Does the author effectively weave fact and fiction within the narrative? What are some examples that resonated with you?
2. Motherhood is a dominant theme in this novel. Miriam and her mother have a strained relationship, as do Miriam and Ilana, and Ilana and Sarah. How are these tense relations worsened by current events within the different generations? How are they affected by secrets?

3. After Sarah researches Latvian Jewish history at the Blackstone Library, and connects these events with her mother and grandmother, she concludes, 'I am who I am because they were who they were'. Within your own family, who has shaped the person you have become?
4. Although you only see Ilana as an adult through Sarah's eyes, you do get a sense of who she is as a mother and as a wife. What do you think she would say about Sarah diving into her past and traveling to Riga?
5. Throughout the novel, Sarah cannot stop thinking about her last conversation with her mother, when they disagree about marriage. Why do you think her mother is so concerned about Sarah settling down with a husband? Do you think Sarah gains a modicum of peace after her trip to Riga?
6. To pursue the career she desires, within a male-dominated industry in the 1970's, Sarah puts her job ahead of her friends and Henry. She must also tolerate a misogynous boss. How have things improved since then, for women in the workforce? How have things stagnated?
7. Sarah's mother is determined to keep her Jewish heritage, as well as her struggle to survive the Latvian Holocaust, from Sarah. To ensure Sarah is shielded from the past, she insists Miriam and Sarah's father, say nothing. Was this the right thing to do? How did this decision affect Sarah? How would you feel if a secret about your identity was kept from you?
8. What do you think Roger's motives are for helping Sarah? How did you feel about him when you discovered he is a KGB agent? What are some examples about living behind the Iron Curtain that surprised you?
9. Freedom is a recurring motif within this narrative, in both 1940's and 1970's Riga. In fact, Latvia didn't regain its independence until 1991 and, since then, people have struggled to adapt to democracy and capitalism. Having read about the lives of some of these citizens, within this narrative, what are possible reasons people are finding it so hard to succeed in a newly free country?
10. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* found Holocaust survivors' grandchildren were overrepresented by about 300 percent in psychiatric care referrals in 1988. More recently, Rachel Yehuda, professor of psychiatry of neuroscience at New York's Mount Sinai School of Medicine, has conducted research showing that children of Holocaust survivors with PTSD, were born with low cortisol levels, "predisposing them to relive the PTSD symptoms of the previous generation." (Cortisol is a stress hormone that helps bodies return to normal after trauma.) In other words, descendants experience their ancestor's unresolved trauma. This concept of 'inter-generational trauma' is prevalent in *Daughters of the Occupation*, as well as in descendants of Holocaust and indigenous residential school survivors. Do you believe it is possible to pass trauma down through generations? Are there examples of this within your family?
11. This novel shows how many local citizens, who lived peacefully amongst Jews before WWII, collaborated with the Nazis by joining the Arajs Kommando and murdering Jews. How do you think ordinary people become killers? What are some current examples of this type of behavior?
12. By the end of *Daughters of the Occupation*, Miriam gets closure, knowing what happened to Monya, and Sarah has a stronger sense of identity, after discovering her maternal history. Assuming Miriam has a long life, where do you see these characters in five or ten years? Do you think Sarah will reclaim her faith and live as a Jew? Do you think they will try to get Monya and his family out of Latvia?