



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER



THE SECRETS WE KEPT
Lara Prescott
VINTAGE

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WE KEPT
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BOOK CLUB KIT



Dear Reader,

I'm absolutely thrilled you've chosen my novel for your book club!

The Secrets We Kept is driven by strong women's voices, and—like *Doctor Zhivago*—is about war, propaganda, persecution, and above all else, love. It's about the experiences and feelings we all share—no matter what time or place we come from. It's about using history as a tool to understand our present. As Boris Pasternak once wrote, "It's past; you'll understand it later."

I believe books bind us together. They help us explore new places, even if we can't travel. They have the power to put us in someone else's shoes, or in another time—to live other lives. In a word, they build empathy, and we could use every ounce of that possible.

Thank you and I hope you enjoy *The Secrets We Kept*.

Yours,
Lara Prescott

“ENTHRALLING. . . .
A rare page-turner with prose
that's as wily as its plot.”
— *Vogue*

A CONVERSATION WITH LARA

Q: Where did you first come across the story of *Doctor Zhivago*'s storied publication? Can you tell us a little about its history?

A: I thank my parents for this! In 2014, my father sent me a *Washington Post* article titled: "During Cold War, CIA used 'Doctor Zhivago' as a tool to undermine Soviet Union." I devoured the incredible true story behind the novel's publication—a story involving clandestine propaganda missions, vying governments, books used as weapons, personal intrigue, and heartache. From that point on, I wanted to find out everything I could about the story behind the story.

Italy was actually the first country to publish *Doctor Zhivago*. Pasternak covertly gave his manuscript to Sergio D'Angelo—an Italian employee of Radio Moscow with connections to publisher Giangiacomo Feltrinelli. D'Angelo hand-delivered the novel to Feltrinelli in West Berlin. Once the Soviets discovered the Italians had the novel, they pressured them to return it immediately. But Feltrinelli stood firm and soon *Zhivago* became an international bestseller.

After the book saw tremendous success in the West, the CIA obtained the banned manuscript, clandestinely printed it, and smuggled it back into the USSR.

Q: You have said that Olga Ivinskaya, Pasternak's real-life mistress and inspiration for his character Lara, became your muse as well while writing this novel. What about her do you find most inspiring and compelling?

A: While most eyes gravitate toward the famous man in the spotlight, I've always been most intrigued by the woman behind it. *The Secrets We Kept* begins in the West, opening on the CIA's typing pool; and indeed, that was the first voice that came to me when I began the project. But when I discovered *A Captive of Time*—the autobiography by Pasternak's mistress and muse, Olga Ivinskaya—I realized I was missing half the story. Ivinskaya was sent to the Gulag (twice) for her involvement with Pasternak. And, seeing this

experience through her eyes—what it was like to stand by the love of her life no matter the cost, to suffer at the hands of the State—I knew there had to be an Eastern thread in the novel which had to be anchored by her story. Over the years, Olga's story and reputation has been suppressed by those wanting to protect Pasternak's legacy. Above all else, I wanted to give her a voice once more.

Q: This novel is really about unsung heroines—Sally and Irina and all the other women in the CIA typing pool and of course Olga. Did you begin *The Secrets We Kept* with the purpose of bringing to life the women who have often been overshadowed by men and putting them center stage?

A: Most definitely. As mentioned above, at the forefront of my mind while writing *The Secrets We Kept* was telling the story of *Zhivago*'s writing and the USSR's persecution of Pasternak through the eyes of Olga, without whom the book may never have been written. Also at the forefront was telling the story of all those women—many lost to history—who served the United States during WWII and the CIA's early days.

Q: *The Secrets We Kept* is about the power of books, in this case how one book impacted history. Do you think books can still do that? What are the books that have been the most important to you?

A: I know this much to be true: Books have certainly changed my own life. Books like Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, and Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* all had a hand in changing the way I view the world. To me, there is no greater way to build empathy than storytelling. Books allow us to experience others' lives, visit other time periods, and walk the streets of places we've never been. In a time where there is so much talk of building walls and vitriolic rhetoric that emphasizes all that makes us different, it is almost a revolutionary act to imagine all that makes us similar.

“A gorgeous and romantic feast of a novel.”—*The New York Times*

“We unveil ourselves in the pieces we want others to know, even those closest to us. We all have our secrets.”



Discussion Questions for *THE SECRETS WE KEPT*

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. 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?
5. 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. Over 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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” (p. 243).

Suggested Further Reading:

The Zhivago Affair by Peter Finn and Petra Couvee; *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak; *Lovers at the Chameleon Club* by Francine Prose; *Vera* by Stacy Schiff; *Hidden Figures* by Margot Lee Shetterly; *Astonish Me* by Maggie Shipstead; *A Gentleman in Moscow* by Amor Towles

East & West Cocktails and an Appetizer

Set the mood for your gathering with Lara's recipes for cocktails and an appetizer inspired by the Russian and American settings of *The Secrets We Kept*.



Mama's Moscow Mule

Ingredients

- 2 ounces vodka
- The juice of ½ lime
- 6 oz. ginger beer

Directions

1. Squeeze the juice of half a lime into a Moscow Mule mug (or glass tumbler) and drop in spent shell.
2. Add 2–3 ice cubes and vodka.
3. Top with cold ginger beer and stir.
4. Serve with the stirring rod.

Recipe adapted from *Esquire*

Vegan Blini with Sour Cream

(makes 18 blini)

Lara's plant-based take on a Russian favorite!

Ingredients

- ½ cup buckwheat flour
- ½ cup unbleached, all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 ¼ cups unsweetened nondairy milk (almond, soy, or oat)
- 3 tablespoons vegan butter, melted
- Vegan butter for frying (Lara recommends Earth Balance)
- Nondairy sour cream (Lara recommends Tofutti Better Than Sour Cream)
- ½ bunch fresh chives, minced for garnish

Directions

1. In a medium bowl, combine the flours and baking powder. Whisk in the nondairy milk and melted butter into the flour until it creates a pancake-like batter.
2. Allow the batter to rest for 5 minutes.
3. Heat a large nonstick pan over medium heat. Add a dab of butter to the pan.
4. To form each blini, pour a little more than a tablespoon of batter into the pan. You can usually cook 4–6 blini at a time. Wait until the pancakes begin to show air bubbles all over the tops and the bottoms are brown. Flip the blini over and cook until golden brown.
5. Using the back of a spoon, spread a small amount of the vegan sour cream on each blini.
6. Top with minced chives and serve hot.

"We all type, but some of us did more. We spoke no word of the work we did after we covered our typewriters each day. Unlike some of the men, WE COULD KEEP OUR SECRETS."



Sally's Red Tom Collins

Ingredients

- 1 ½ ounces gin
- The juice of ½ lemon
- 1 teaspoon of sugar
- 3 ounces club soda (or enough to fill glass)
- Splash of maraschino cherry juice
- Garnish: maraschino cherry

Directions

1. In a Collins glass filled with 2–3 ice cubes, pour the gin, lemon juice, and simple syrup.
2. Stir thoroughly.
3. Top with club soda and a splash of maraschino cherry juice.
4. Garnish with a cherry or two.

*Recipe adapted from *The Artistry of Mixing Drinks* by Frank Meier (of the Ritz Bar, Paris)

"The funny thing was, I never thought of myself as a spy. Surely the craft took more than smiling and laughing at stupid jokes and pretending to be interested in everything these men said. There wasn't a name for it back then, but it was at that first party that I became a Swallow: a woman who uses her God-given talents to gain information.... These men thought they were using me, but it was always the reverse; my power was making them think it wasn't."

Music that inspired the writing of *THE SECRETS WE KEPT*

Music played a pivotal role during the writing of Lara's novel. She's often inspired by music and uses it to tap into a certain emotion or place while writing. She usually writes listening to the same song, over and over again, until she tunes out the words and is left with just the feeling. We hope these playlists get you even more into the mood of *The Secrets We Kept* and make the perfect backdrop for your discussion.

Lara's East Playlist

For the Eastern thread, Lara listened mostly to atmospheric music. This includes contemporary artists like Sufjan Stevens, Philip Glass, and Explosions in the Sky. She also listened to sparse classical music—such as Franz Liszt, Tchaikovsky, and two Ukrainian pianist friends of Boris Pasternak's: Heinrich Neuhaus (who was also the first husband of Pasternak's wife Zinaida), and Sviatoslav Richter (who played at Pasternak's funeral).

"Doctor Zhivago – Prelude and Lara's Theme,"

Maurice Jarre

"Thaw," Ken Thomson, JACK Quartet

"Piano Sonata No. 14 in C-Sharp Minor, Op. 27, No. 2 "Moonlight": I. Adagio sostenuto,"

Ludwig van Beethoven, Heinrich Neuhaus

"6 Consolations, S. 172: No. 3 in D Flat Major (Lento, placido)," Franz Liszt, Daniel Barenboim

"Mystery of Love," Sufjan Stevens

"Début," Roberta Flack featuring Donny Hathaway

"Back Together Again," Mélanie Laurent

"Threnody," Goldmund

"Your Hand in Mine," Explosions in the Sky

"Clear Language," Balmorhea

"Vladimir's Blues," Max Richter

"Falling, Catching," Agnes Obel

"Empire Builder," Laura Gibson

"Animal," Javier Dunn

"Start a War," Dom La Nena

"Throes," Half Moon Run

Lara's West Playlist

While composing the Western thread, Lara listened predominantly to 1950s and 1960s music. She especially listened to R&B, jazz, and soul music popular in Washington, D.C. during that time—artists like Shirley Horn, Duke Ellington, Ruth Brown, and more. She also listened to 50s and 60s-era Italian and French music while writing this thread, including Édith Piaf and Mina.

"Somebody Was Watching," ABC

"It's A Man's World," James Brown

"Long Walk To D.C.," The Staple Singers

"I Heard It Through The Grapevine," Marvin Gaye

"Baby (You've Got What It Takes),"

Dinah Washington, Brook Benton

"Be My Baby," The Ronettes

"Sh-Boom – Single Version," The Chords

"I'm In Love Again," Fats Domino

"You Send Me - Remastered," Sam Cooke

"Volare (Nel Blu Di Pinto Di Blu) - Remastered,"

Dean Martin

"Più di te (I Won't Tell)," Mina

"Baby I'm Yours," Barbara Lewis

"Straight From The Heart," Irma Thomas

"Stagger Lee (Re-Recorded)," Lloyd Price

"Cigarettes and Coffee," Otis Redding