



FOREVER



# **THE PARIS SECRET**

## **Reading Group Guide**

## Book Club Questions

*Note that these questions might contain some plot spoilers.*

1. Had you heard of the Air Transport Auxiliary and the women who worked for that organization before you read this book? Which of their experiences in dealing with the RAF and the male establishment did you find the most deplorable?
2. Why do you think women like Catherine Dior have been forgotten by history? Is it due to their gender, their reticence to speak about their wartime experiences, the nature of the savagery they endured, or other factors? What can we do to make sure the heroines of today aren't similarly forgotten in the future?
3. How much did you know about Ravensbrück, Hitler's concentration camp for women, before you read *The Paris Secret*? How difficult was this part of the book for you to read, and do you think the author achieved her aim of bringing to light the injustices and terrible acts committed against women in the camp? Why do you think the Nazis established a concentration camp solely for women?
4. Did Skye and Liberty do the "right" thing after the war? Can you understand why neither was in touch with the other afterward? How might things have changed if they had tried harder to find each other? Is pretending to be someone else ever acceptable, and what did you think of their actions after the war?
5. How would the book have been different if it had been told from Liberty's point of view? In what way would the childhood sections of the book have changed? What did you think of Liberty and did this perception alter as the book progressed? Would you have liked to have seen more from the perspective of any other character?

6. Take a look on the internet and see if you can find pictures of the Dior gowns referenced in *The Paris Secret*. Do you have a favorite? If you do, why do you think the author chose that particular dress for that particular moment in the book? Can fashion be art, and can it, as Margaux says, restore and revive the spirits? Can it have any meaning beyond providing protective covering, or is fashion merely frivolous?

# Essay: The Story Behind the Book

By Natasha Lester

## The Real Hero: Catherine Dior

I expect that before you read *The Paris Secret* you had heard of Christian Dior. But had you heard of his sister, Catherine? I certainly hadn't until I read about her in Anne Sebba's wonderful book *Les Parisiennes: How the Women of Paris Lived, Loved, and Died Under Nazi Occupation*. Sebba mentioned Catherine a few times, that she had worked with the French Resistance and had been captured by the Nazis and deported to Ravensbrück concentration camp. Her work with the Resistance was so heroic and so important that, after the war, Catherine was awarded a Croix de guerre and the Légion d'honneur by the French, and the King's Medal for Courage in the Cause of Freedom by the British.

The terrible injustice of what and who the world remembers struck me immediately: the man who once made dresses is so famous that most people, if asked to name a couturier, would mention Christian Dior. But his sister, who fought for freedom for her country and who nearly lost her life in that struggle, had been forgotten.

I embarked on a quest to find out more, a quest that uncovered very little concrete information about Catherine, who rarely spoke about her wartime experiences after the end of the hostilities. Still, I wanted to find whatever I could and my journey took me to Melbourne and Sydney in Australia, and to Paris and Granville in France.

An exhibition about the House of Dior in Melbourne, besides allowing me to revel in the beauty of the gowns, revealed only that the perfume Miss Dior was named for Catherine. Christian had been uncertain about what to call his very first fragrance and then, one day in 1947, Catherine had

walked into a room while he was discussing that very problem. Someone said, 'Ah, here is Miss Dior.' And thus the perfume was named.

In Paris, there was another exhibition of beautiful Dior gowns and, amidst the glamour, one small piece of paper that caught my eye: a letter from Christian Dior to his father, advising the latter that Catherine had been liberated from Ravensbrück concentration camp. The letter was dated April 1945. But what had happened to Catherine in the preceding years, both at the camp and while she was working with the Resistance, and what had happened to her afterwards?

More questions. Seeking answers, I went to Granville in Normandy, France. Villa Les Rhumbs, the ex-Dior family home, sits atop a cliff there and is now a museum dedicated to the Diors. Here I saw several photographs of Catherine, read a little about her life in the house as a child, and saw what was once her bedroom. But there still remained a huge gap of time between child-Catherine and hero-Catherine, the woman who, against all odds, left Ravensbrück with her life.

That gap has not yet been filled extensively by any writer or archive, but there is, thankfully, a biography of Catherine scheduled to be published in fall 2020. In the meantime, I had to use much imagination and some fabrication to work Catherine into my story because I desperately wanted people to know about this other, arguably more important, Dior sibling.

### **The Dresses**

As you read through *The Paris Secret*, you'll see the names of many House of Dior gowns. All of these are gowns that I saw at the *Dior: Couturier du Rêve* exhibition at the Musée des Arts Decoratifs in Paris, *The House of Dior: Seventy Years of Haute Couture* exhibition at the NGV in Melbourne, or on my two visits to Villa les Rhumbs in France.

My phone is almost weighed down with an excess of the photographs I took of so many of the gowns at each museum in order to refer to them during the writing of the book. I encourage you to go online, search the names and take a look at them - and try to choose a favorite!

## **Searching for Skye's Home**

After France, I went on to England and spent several days driving through idyllic Cornish villages, trying to find one that would be just right for Skye's home. St. Ives was too busy. Fowey was divine but lacked the kind of rugged coastline I had in mind.

I don't know what made me drive into Porthleven - a whim or an intuition - but as soon as I walked to the end of the pier, looked back at the small but pretty town and then along the shore towards a clifftop on which perched a lonely house or two, I knew I had found Skye's home.

I walked along the beach and then clambered all over the clifftop, near the few houses there, taking lots of photos of the view and the surrounds. Luckily nobody came out and asked me what I was doing!

There is no cave on the beach at Porthleven like there is in the book - I stole that from the beach at Tintagel, also in Cornwall. The moment I saw the cave there, I could clearly imagine Skye and Nicholas inside it, so I added an element of make-believe to Porthleven Beach. On my travels around Cornwall, I also visited the Lost Gardens of Heligan, which are truly delightful. I was fascinated by the idea of a lost garden that had been found and resurrected and knew I had to use that in the book too. Many of the objects in the lost garden in *The Paris Secret* are stolen from Heligan, including the rope bridge over the lake, and the statue of the sleeping woman.

## **Learning to Fly**

Then it was time to learn about planes and pilots. This was the most difficult area to research as I knew nothing about the mechanics of flight before I began.

Luckily, the National Archives in Kew, England still has all the papers from the Air Transport Auxiliary and 161 Squadron. This meant I could look through photographs of all the women in the

ATA, see how much they were paid compared to the men, and read the many letters Pauline Gower wrote exhorting those in charge to employ more women in the ATA.

In 161 Squadron's papers, I read through the Air Transport forms that detailed where in France each evening's pickup operation was to take place, how many agents were to be dropped off and how many collected, and how many containers of supplies for the resistance were to be unloaded. Also on file were the reports after each mission that detailed weather conditions, problems encountered en route such as enemy fire or planes, mechanical issues, and problems at the landing field. These papers were a treasure trove and, without them, much of the necessary detail would have been missing from my story. It was also quite thrilling to be handling papers stamped "Secret" and "Most Secret"!

From there I travelled to Tangmere Military Aviation Museum, located at the former RAF Tangmere, the base where Nicholas works in the book. So I was able to walk in the footsteps of my characters and climb into and out of Spitfires and Lysanders, and see the L-shaped flare path lit by Resistance torches, signalling to the Lysanders in the sky.

I also visited Hamble, where Skye is based for much of the book. The airbase is now gone and all that remains is a small and rather sad memorial attesting to the fact that women once ruled the skies there.

### **Getting My Hands on a Dior Gown**

The very last stop on my research trip was back home in Australia, in Sydney. I wanted to touch a Dior gown from the late 1940s, to look inside it and really examine it. I also wanted to understand more about what a fashion conservator did so that I could write Kat's part of the book authentically.

I sent an email asking for help to a museum in Sydney called the Powerhouse, which has the best fashion collection of any museum in Australia. As luck would have it, at the exact moment that my email landed in the inbox of the fashion conservator at the Powerhouse museum, she was reading one of my previous books, *The Paris Seamstress!* So she knew who I was and was more than happy to help me.

I donned a pair of rubber gloves and descended with her into the depths of the museum. She explained all the many different methods conservators use to store precious old gowns and items of clothing. Then the conservator pulled open a large drawer. Nestled inside in acid free paper was the Christian Dior *Moulin à Vent*, or Windmill dress, from 1949!

The interior of the dress was an absolute marvel – I had no idea how many hook and eye closures were used by couturiers like Dior to ensure a dress shaped itself properly around a body, nor that covered lead weights were sewn into such pieces so they would hang correctly. It was just as interesting to see the internal construction of the dress as it was to marvel at its stunning exterior.

As a historical novelist, I'm indebted to archives and museums the world over – without them, my books would be much the poorer and so much more would have to be imagined, rather than based on truth and fact. And I like to honor the past properly, by doing my research and drawing unknown and fascinating elements into a story that everyone can enjoy. I truly hope I succeeded with *The Paris Secret* and that you enjoyed reading the book as much as I enjoyed researching and writing it.