

BOOK CLUB KIT

the OPERA SISTERS

MARIANNE MONSON

BASED ON THE REMARKABLE TRUE STORY

*of the Cook sisters, who smuggled valuables
out of 1930s Nazi Germany to finance a
daring, secret operation to help Jews find
hope for a new life in England.*

BOOK CLUB KIT

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A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

Heroes come in many shapes and sizes. Like many of you, I was raised on stories of the heroes of World War 2. My own grandfather served in the Tenth Mountain Division, fighting his way up mountains in the Italian Alps and recapturing strategic points from the Nazis. These were the stories I was raised with—tales of armies, battles, and all the headlines of history.

At that point, in the 1980s and 90s, women's stories of war were largely waiting in the shadows, unshared. During graduate school, I started digging into my own family history. I found incredible stories of resilient, remarkable women, and became convinced there were many, many more stories to be told. I've dedicated my career to telling those stories.

In late 2019, my editor sent me a magazine article about Ida and Louise Cook. I had never heard of them, but immediately became intrigued by their story. As chaos and violence broke out in Europe, these middle-aged,

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*Heart-wrenching
and eye-opening.
Perfect for fans
of strong and
resilient female
characters.*

—Booklist

working class women had every excuse to say there was nothing they could do. No one would have thought less of them. The vast majority of people who lived through that era believed there was little they could do to alleviate the terrible suffering, and they may have been right.

But Ida and Louise didn't accept that. Because of their compassionate hearts and extraordinary perseverance, they found what they could do—and they did that—again and again and again. Wherever they turned, they found someone to love.

As I researched everything I could find about their story, a global pandemic erupted. With archives shuttered and closed, it was slow going, but I was motivated by the many parallels I found between our time and theirs—rising inflation, the allure of populist leaders, mounting political strife, and floods of refugees. As I finally sent the book to press, the invasion of Ukraine began, which became one more uncanny parallel.

I had assumed I'd have to cancel my research trip to the U.K. in September 2020, but to my surprise, the E.U. consulate wrote to me and said that I had special permission to enter. With this serendipity, it seemed clear that Louise and Ida's story was ready to be told. Standing in their childhood house was an experience I will never forget and brought me closer to understanding the truly remarkable women they were.

It is my hope, dear reader, that you will find courage to face and define your own tumultuous era in these pages.

Thank you for reading and joining their journey,



Marianne Monson

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1.

Which scene stuck with you most, and why?

2.

There is a lot of era-specific music mentioned in these pages, from opera to jazz. **Were you familiar with the music mentioned? Did you listen to any of it as you read?**

3.

How did the Nazi regime use music as a tool of war? **How did the Cook sisters use music as a tool of healing?**

4.

Did your opinion of the book change as you read it? How did it impact you? Are there lingering questions you're still thinking about?

5.

Which physical places in the book would you most like to visit?

6.

Who was your favorite character?

Did you relate more to Ida or Louise? They are very different people, but how would you describe their relationship? How were their unique strengths both important to their success?

7.

World War II has been written about a great deal. **Was there any aspect of the war's suffering you hadn't been aware of?**



The Vienna Opera House, where Ida and Louise went to operas.

8.

Which events do you find to be most relevant to struggles today?

9.

If you could illustrate this book, which scenes would you illustrate? If you could cast the movie who would play Ida and Louise?

10.

What questions would you have for the author?

11.

How does this book title relate to the contents? If you could give it a new title, what would it be?



A small village near Sunderland, UK, where Ida and Louise spent their childhoods.



The Munich Opera House, where Ida and Louise attended operas and a scene in the Opera Sisters takes place.

“

This story about moral courage in the face of risk stays warm and light.

—Foreword Reviews

Questions & Answers with Marianne Monson



Recently installed plaque outside the sisters' childhood home in Sunderland.

Q: How did you learn about this true story?

A: I learned about it when my editor sent me a magazine article about Ida and Louise Cook. I'd been wanting to write a World War 2 novel for sometime, and this seemed like a great opportunity. I fell in love with their sweet sister relationship and the way they drew strength from each other, which isn't a relationship that is often portrayed in fiction.

Q: What did you find the most inspiring when you researched this story?

A: I loved the way the Cook sisters came from a very ordinary background, but their passions and ability to care led them to do remarkable things. I was inspired by the way they leaned on each other, their community, and their art to survive the horrific events unfolding around them.

Q: What do you want readers to gain from this story?

A: I hope they see clear parallels to the modern era we find ourselves in and feel inspired to follow the Cooks' lead and find a way to stay involved even when circumstances are dire.

Q: What have you gained by writing this story?

A: So much inspiration. I'd love to be like Ida Cook when I "grow up" someday. Her ability to truly love people is astounding. She used that love to change people's lives permanently--to change the lives and trajectories of whole families. She changed the course of history for a number of people, and she did it by being fully and only herself. I was also deeply inspired by the Jewish refugees, by their tenacity, their perseverance, their ability to reinvent themselves and rebuild their lives and communities in a completely different culture. Some of those who escaped turned around and enlisted--went back to Europe to take up arms against Hitler. That kind of resilience is remarkable.

Q: What writing projects are you working on next?

A: I'm working on a YA immigration novel that I'm co-writing with a colleague. I'm really excited about the project. It explores the Guatemalan Civil War and its impact, and is my first book that is set partially in Oregon, where I've lived for the last 25 years.

Q:

What is your background in writing?

A:

I decided to become a writer when I was seven, and I never changed my mind. I earned an English Lit degree and then worked at a publishing house, in order to understand the business aspect of it. I earned an MFA from Vermont College of Fine Arts, which is where I worked with some remarkable mentors and truly got serious about the work. Since then, I've authored and edited fourteen published books as well as numerous magazine and newspaper articles and poems. I'm still a regular journal writer. At the end of the day, I write because I love it, and I couldn't live without it. Books have been my best friends through the most difficult times in my life and it's an honor to think words I've written might be that for someone else.

“

Ordinary women find their inner strength, engaging in determined, clandestine actions to give others hope.

—FOREWORD REVIEWS

Q:

What do you want readers to know about this story?

A:

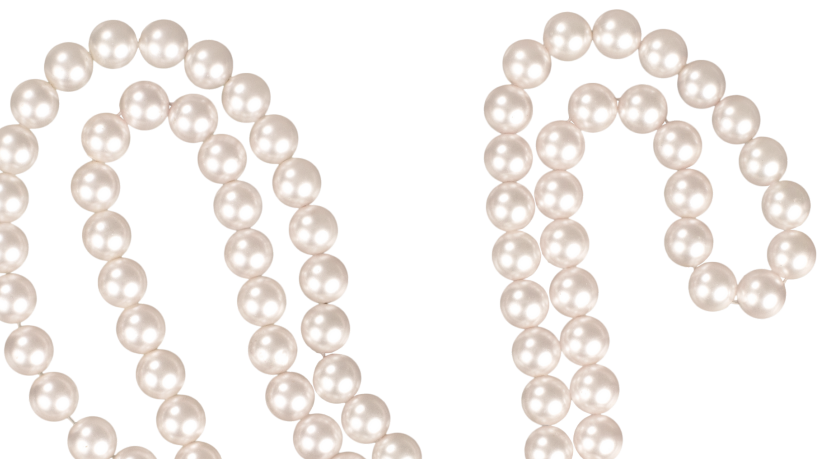
I'd like them to know that they can expect a World War 2 story that is different from those they've heard before and one that has remarkable parallels to today's world: rising inflation, the allure of populist leaders, mounting political strife, and rising numbers of refugees--it is easy to see our own era in these pages.

Q:

How does this book stand apart from other WWII historical fiction books?

A:

*There are so many books about WW2 out there that it's daunting to attempt to contribute to the literature on the era. I feel that *The Opera Sisters* examines some of the lesser known events of the era (like the hyper inflation in the Weimar republic, the Nazi rally at Madison Square Garden in New York City, the origins behind Kristallnacht, and the battle of Warsaw), and shows the Cooks' work contextualized against this backdrop.*



RECOMMENDED DISCOGRAPHY

Amelita Galli-Curci (soprano). Galli-Curci: Golden Age Coloratura. RCA Victrola VIC-1518 (LP), 1970.

Clemens Krauss (conductor). Beethoven, Fidelio. London, 1947. Opera Depot OD 11405-2 (CD), 2015.

Vera Lynn. We'll Meet Again: The Very Best of Vera Lynn, Recordings 1936–1959. Decca Records B0013641-02 (CD), 2009.

Ezio Pinza (bass). Mozart, Don Giovanni. Bruno Walter, conductor. New York, Metropolitan Opera, 1942. Andromeda 9040 (CD), 2006.

———. Verdi, "Finale, Part 1." With Rosa Ponselle (soprano) and Giovanni Martinelli (tenor). Rosario Bourdon, conductor. New York, 1926. Victor Matrix CVE-41625 (LP), 1926.

Rosa Ponselle (soprano). Bizet, Carmen. With René Maison (tenor) and Ezio Pinza (bass). Louis Hasselmans, conductor. Cleveland, OH, Metropolitan Opera. Walhall WHL15 (CD), 2006.

———. Rosa Ponselle on the Air. Mozart, Don Giovanni. "Batti, batti." André Kostelanetz, conductor. New York, Metropolitan Opera, 1934. Marston 52012-2 (CD), 2000.

———. Rosa Ponselle sings Verdi. Verdi, La forza del destino. "Pace, pace, mio Dio." With Ezio Pinza (bass). New York, Metropolitan Opera, 1928. Naxos 8.110728 (CD), 2002.

———. Verdi, La traviata. With Frederick Jagel (tenor) and Lawrence Tibbett (baritone). Ettore Panizza, conductor. New York, Metropolitan Opera, 1935. Pearl GEMM 235 (CD), 1982.

Viorica Ursuleac (soprano). Strauss, Adriane auf Naxos (highlights). With Helge Rosvaenge (tenor) and Erna Berger (soprano). Clemens Krauss, conductor. Berlin, 1935. Preiser Records (CD), 2007.

———. Strauss, Arabella. Clemens Krauss, conductor. Salzburg, 1942. Opera Depot OD 11496-2, 2016.

———. Strauss, Friedenstag. With Hans Hotter (bass-baritone). Clemens Krauss, conductor. Wien, 1939. Koch-Schwann 3-1465-2 (CD), 1994.

Wagner, Richard. Der Ring Des Nibelungen: 1. Das Rheingold. Bayreuth Festival Orchestra and Chorus, Clemens Krauss, conductor, 1953. Pristine Classical PACO039 (CD), 2010.

PRAISE FOR *the* OPERA SISTERS

"The well-documented accounts of life under Nazi rule and the slow dismantling of the Jewish community and way of life are heart-wrenching and eye-opening. Perfect for fans of strong and resilient female characters." —**Booklist**

"Driven by their convictions and their passion for music, two English sisters provide aid to German Jewish families in Monson's kaleidoscopic historical novel. This story about moral courage in the face of risk stays warm and light. Ida['s] repartee with Louise is loving. In scenes together, they are delightful, and their impact on others is clear. Ordinary women find their inner strength, engaging in determined, clandestine actions to give others hope."

—**Foreword Reviews**

"Historical fiction that is based on a true story of selflessness and courage of epic proportions. A great read shedding light on a fabulous story."

—**Rachel, Netgalley Review**

"A beautifully written book based on the true story of Ida and Louise Cook. I cannot recommend *The Opera Sisters* highly enough."

—**Sue, Netgalley Review**

"Truly amazing story."

—**Ron, Netgalley Review**



About the Author

MARIANNE MONSON



MARIANNE MONSON received her MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College of Fine Arts and primarily writes on topics related to women's history. She has taught English and Creative Writing at the community college and university levels and is the author of twelve books for children and adults, including the novel *Her Quiet Revolution* and her nonfiction works *Frontier Grit* and *Women of the Blue and Gray*.

She is the founder of The Writer's Guild, a literary nonprofit, and writes from a 100-year-old house in Astoria, Oregon.

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