

The Secret History of Audrey James

By Heather Marshall

About the Author

Heather Marshall lives near Toronto with her family and their giant golden retriever. She worked in politics and communications before finally turning her attention to her true passion: storytelling.

Heather's debut novel *Looking for Jane* was an instant #1 bestseller and dominated the Toronto Star and Globe and Mail bestseller charts for half a year, including 5 weeks at #1. It continues to appear on the charts three years after its initial release.

Selected as one of Indigo's Top 10 Best Books of 2022, the Globe and Mail's Top 100 Books of 2022, and CBC's Best Canadian Fiction of 2022, *Looking for Jane* was also chosen as STYLE Canada's Book of the Month, a CityLine Book Club pick, an Indie Next pick, and was a finalist for the 2023 Goodreads Choice Awards in both the debut and historical fiction categories. It has been published in 17 languages in 21 territories around the world, and was optioned for development into a television series.

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About the Book

Audrey James is weeks away from graduating from a prestigious music school in Berlin, where she's been living with her best friend, Ilse Kaplan. As she prepares to finish her piano studies, Audrey dreads the thought of returning to her father in England and leaving Ilse behind. Families like the Kaplans are being targeted as war in Europe threatens.

When Ilse's parents and brother suddenly disappear, two high-ranking Nazi party members confiscate the Kaplans' upscale home, believing it to be empty. In a desperate attempt to keep Ilse safe, Audrey becomes housekeeper for the officers while Ilse is forced into hiding in the attic—a prisoner in her own home. Tensions rise in the house and the chance of survival diminishes by the day. When a shocking turn of events pushes Audrey to become embroiled in cell of the anti-Hitler movement – clusters of resisters working to bring down the Nazis from within Germany itself – Audrey must decide what matters most: saving herself, protecting her friend, or sacrificing everything for the greater good.

Inspired by true stories of two courageous women and the German resistance during WWII, this is a captivating novel about the unbreakable bonds of friendship, the sacrifices we make for those we love, and the healing that comes from human connection.

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Discussion Questions

1. A major theme of the novel is the many ways scars and traumas from the past shape who the characters are. Discuss the connection between the novel's two main characters, Audrey and Kate.
2. How do Audrey and Kate differ in how they deal with their trauma and survivor's guilt? In what ways are they similar?
3. In what ways was Audrey limited by the period in which she came of age? Did you relate at all to her resistance to conforming to outside pressures? Did she abandon her dream of an unconventional life when she moved up to Alnwick after the war? In what way(s) does she still achieve it at the Oakwood?
4. Audrey and Kate's complicated relationships with their respective fathers are foundational to their characters. Compare those relationships and the impact they had on each of the women. In what ways are they similar or different?
5. At one point Ilse expresses that she feels entirely out of control of her own life; that her choices are always just life or death and nothing else, a sentiment many people in her position would have felt under Nazi rule. How does Ilse try to maintain some semblance of control over her life throughout the story?
6. The unintended deaths of the children at the Hanover Opera House haunt Audrey throughout her life, though Friedrich (and Ludwig) maintained it would always have been worth the risk. In the moment they decided to do it, how did you feel about the Red Orchestra's morally complicated choice to risk killing others in their attempt to eliminate Hitler for the greater good? Did you feel differently about their decision once you knew the outcome? Why or why not?
7. Audrey's love for Ilse drives her decisions throughout the entire novel, and her relationships with the other women she loved (Wen and Kate) were forged in fire. How did each of those relationships impact Audrey at the time, and influence her in the future?
8. After the war, Audrey fatefully decides to take Daniel to the Jewish orphanage in London to let him be raised in his own faith, and she clearly struggles with that decision for the rest of her life. What did you think of her choice? Do you think her giving him up for adoption did more harm or good, in the end? Was she truly honouring Ilse's dying wish, or was the decision more self-focused?
9. Kate notes that her father believed antiques and old buildings "have secrets and lessons to share." How does the Oakwood Inn, as a setting, embody this idea? In what ways does it become a character in Kate's story?

10. Both Audrey and Kate deal with the weight of decisions that alter their lives forever. Audrey chooses to stay in Berlin for Ilse, while Kate chooses to leave London for the Oakwood Inn. What do these choices say about the ways people seek meaning in uncertain times?

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Author Interview

Hi, Heather! Can you tell our readers a bit about yourself?

Hi! I'm a Canadian author based just outside of Toronto. *The Secret History of Audrey James* is my second novel; my debut was called *Looking for Jane*, which released in the US in February of 2023.

When did you first discover your love for writing and stories?

My parents and grandmother read to me pretty much from birth, and I've been writing since I could spell and hold a pencil! My love of words is one that will last a lifetime.

Quick lightning round! Tell us:

The first book you ever remember reading: Probably something by Robert Munsch.

The one that made you want to become an author: Ohhhh tough call, but likely *The Pact* by Jodi Picoult or *The House at Riverton* by Kate Morton.

The one that you can't stop thinking about: *All The Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr.

Your latest novel, *The Secret History of Audrey James*, is out February 25th! If you could only describe it in five words, what would they be?

Emotional, suspenseful, cautionary, evocative, hopeful.

What can readers expect?

Historical immersion with emotional pre-war content, plenty of feminine strength and resilience, a moody old hotel near the Scottish border, and a family-history mystery.

Where did the inspiration for *The Secret History of Audrey James* come from?

I talk about this in the author's note, but I didn't actually set out to write a WWII novel. But when I stumbled across the real-life history of a war heroine named Mona Parsons, I was inspired to mold a character after her life. Her story was so incredible that I found I couldn't not write about her!

Can you tell us a bit about your process when it comes to research?

When I first have an idea for a story, I do a deep dive upfront to make sure that there's enough 'meat' in that particular era/historical setting for me to work with, and that research process often inspires certain plot points and characters, and I go from there. Then I research ad-hoc as I write, both minor details (what kind of heating systems were in upper-class homes in Berlin in the 1930s? What were the names of magazines girls would have read in that time and place?) and major ones (dates of battles and historical turning points, etc).

Were there any moments or characters you really enjoyed writing or exploring?

I can't say a whole lot without giving too much away, but I think this one is on the book jacket, so it's okay: I was fascinated by a piece of history I uncovered about a woman who hid from the Nazis in her own attic when the officers confiscated her home. She hid right under their noses because she figured it was the last place anyone would look for her. This inspired my character Ilse.

Did you face any challenges whilst writing? How did you overcome them?

I think the toughest part of this book's writing process was the emotional taxation. I think when any author sets out to write a WWII book, they know they're in for a heavy research process, and we have to depict on the page some of the most horrific things humans have ever done to one another. So I had to take breaks from the writing and research, step away from it from time to time to ground myself. As an author, you have to be willing to do that emotional labour, because you need to absorb it in order to be able to channel it so your reader feels what you felt while writing it. But that can weigh heavily.

What's next for you?

I'm just closing in on the draft of my next novel, *Liberty Street*, which will publish simultaneously in the US and Canada in spring 2026. I've been researching and thinking about this story since 2021, and I can't wait for it to be in readers' hands! In two sentences: a young journalist goes undercover at a women's prison/psychiatric hospital in the early 1960s to expose the horrific treatment of the inmates. But getting into the prison will turn out to be the easy part—it's getting back out that's the problem...

Lastly, what books are you looking forward to picking up in 2025?

I've just started Jodi Picoult's *By Any Other Name*, which of course I'm loving. I'm also looking forward to *The Three Lives of Cate Kay*, and I'd like to catch up on Celeste Ng's backlist.

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Other Links and Resources

-Introspective article linked on Heather Marshall's website:

<https://everythingzoomer.com/zed-book-club/2024/06/06/the-secret-history-of-audrey-james-pays-homage-to-a-forgotten-canadian-war-heroine/>