

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*

Knopf Doubleday. (n.d.) *The Secrets We Kept Book Club Kit*