

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Martha Hall Kelly holds a degree in Journalism from the Newhouse School at Syracuse University and a Master’s degree in Journalism from Northwestern University’s Medill School. She has spent most of her professional life writing for major advertising agencies, including J. Walter Thompson, McCann-Erickson and BBDO. While raising her children, Martha, a New England native, became captivated with the story of fellow Connecticut resident Caroline Ferriday’s fight to help the fifty Polish survivors of Ravensbruck known as “The Rabbits.” The search for the true story took Martha across the globe, to Caroline’s three archives in Connecticut, Washington D.C. and Nanterre, France.

- [curtisbrown.co.uk](http://curtisbrown.co.uk)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways do you think the alternating points of view helped to enrich the narrative? Was there ever a time you when you wished there was only one narrator? Why or why not?
2. The primary settings of this novel are starkly different – Caroline’s glamorous New York world of benefits and cultural events, and the bleak reality of life in a concentration camp. In what ways did the contrast between these two settings affect your reading experience?
3. Caroline’s relationship with Paul is complicated, taboo even, was there ever a time when you didn’t agree with a choice Caroline made with regards to Paul? When and why?
4. As Caroline became more and more invested in her work with the French Families Fund, and eventually with the “rabbits”, did you feel that she changed in any way? How were those changes apparent through her interactions with others?
5. Throughout their time in Ravensbruck, Kasia and the other prisoners found subtle, and not so subtle, ways to demonstrate their resistance. Discuss the variety of actions they took. Which of them did you find to be most powerful? Most moving? Most effective?

6. When Kasia learned that they were hunting “rabbits” on page 278 she thought “*Just don’t feel anything. If you are to live, you cannot feel.*” Do you agree with this statement? What do you think it says about the nature of survival? Is it relevant to any other characters in the book, not just the prisoners?
7. Did you find Herta to be a sympathetic character? Why or why not?
8. When Vilmer Hartman came to visit Ravensbruck he showed concern for Herta’s mental state. What do you think this revealed about her character? Had you previously thought about any of the points he made?
9. Though the Nazis made sure the German people only got their news from one media point of view, Herta’s father continues to read as many newspapers as he can. Does this relate to media today?
10. Did you feel that Halina’s ring was an important symbol in the book? How did Herta feel about the ring? Why did she keep it?
11. Throughout the novel, in and out of Ravensbruck, the characters experience harrowing, difficult situations. Was there one that you found more memorable than the others? Why do you think the author chose to include it?
12. If you had to come up with a single message or lesson to represent each of the main characters’ experiences – Caroline, Kasia, Herta – what would it be and why?
13. Many of the themes explored in *Lilac Girls* – human rights, political resistance, survival – are a direct result of the historical WWII setting. How are those themes relevant to current events today?
14. *Lilac Girls* also touches on a number of interpersonal themes including female friendship, mother-daughter relationships, love, infidelity, mental health, and more. How do these themes impact the characters’ lives?
15. What do you think the author hoped her readers would take away from this reading experience?
16. Martha Hall Kelly claims that the story of the Ravensbruck concentration camp is one that needed to be told. Though much has been written about the Holocaust, certainly this novel illuminates even more about the events that took place. What aspect(s) of the womens’ stories added most to your understanding of this time in our world’s history?
17. The atrocities carried out at Ravensbruck reveal the darkest side of human nature. How does the author bring light to an otherwise dark story? How do her characters embody human goodness?

- <https://www.readinggroupguides.com/reviews/lilac-girls/guide>

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### Publishers Weekly

Kelly’s compelling first novel follows three women through the course of World War II and beyond. Caroline, a wealthy New Yorker, volunteers at the French consulate in New York, assisting refugees and raising funds. She meets Paul, a charming, married French actor, and sparks fly. Kasia, a young woman living in Poland during the Nazi invasion, works for the resistance until she is captured and sent to Ravensbruck, the women’s concentration

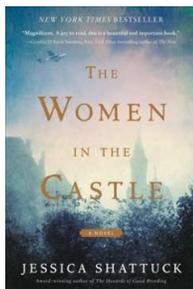
camp. There, she encounters Herta, a doctor hired to help execute inmates and perform experiments. Though her mother is Herta's trusted assistant, and even saved a camp guard's life, Kasia is operated on, joining the "Rabbits," inmates deformed from their surgeries. Meanwhile, Caroline loses touch with Paul when he returns to France to find his wife, and she finds herself tasked with keeping track of the growing concentration camp network for the consulate, learned from British intelligence. After the war, she travels to France to assist in locating missing people, where she learns about the Rabbits, including Kasia, who is struggling to let go of her anger and move on with her life. Despite some horrific scenes, this is a page-turner demonstrating the tests and triumphs civilians faced during war, complemented by Kelly's vivid depiction of history and excellent characters. *Agent: Alexandra Machinist, ICM Partners. (Apr.)*

## Kirkus Reviews

Kelly's three narrators are based on actual people whose destinies converged in or around Ravensbrück, Hitler's concentration camp for women. It's 1939: Hitler has invaded Poland, and although few suspect it, France is next. Caroline, a former debutante who, at 37, appears to have missed her chance for marriage, does charity work at the French Consulate in Manhattan. Requests for visas accelerate, as does demand for the care packages Caroline sends overseas. When her married would-be lover, Paul, leaves New York for Paris shortly before the Germans march in, Caroline fears the worst. Kasia, a former Girl Guide, joins an underground youth group after the Nazis occupy her hometown of Lublin, Poland. Soon she's arrested, along with her mother and sister, Zuzanna, a medical student. The women are sent to Ravensbrück, a concentration camp whose mission is to work the prisoners to death—those, that is, who aren't terminated immediately upon arrival. (A crude form of lethal injection is used, as the Nazis are still experimenting with more efficient means of mass murder.) Kasia watches in horror as one of her former teachers is fatally mauled by a dog set on her by Binz, the head guard. Young physician Herta, the third narrator, is a loyal German and Nazi. Although not happy about Hitler's edict that women doctors cannot be surgeons, she's less than upset when her father's Jewish doctor is deported. She accepts a post at Ravensbrück, where her Hippocratic oath is immediately compromised: her first duty is to dispatch an elderly prisoner. Her eagerness to scrub in quickly overcomes any remaining scruples as Herta conducts grisly surgical "experiments" on inmates, including Kasia. The women, many permanently maimed, who undergo these "studies" become known as the "Rabbits." Kelly vividly re-creates the world of Ravensbrück but is less successful integrating the wartime experience of Caroline, whose involvement with the surviving Rabbits comes very late. In this mashup of two war novels, the more conventional New York story pales by comparison.

## READALIKES

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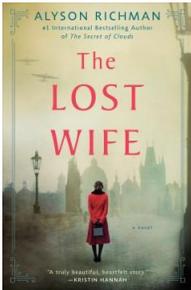
### ***The Women in the Castle* by Jessica Shattuck**

At the end of World War II, Marianne von Lingenfels offers shelter to two widows of fallen resistance fighters and their children in a formerly majestic Bavarian castle that was once host to German aristocrats.



***The Lost Girls of Paris* by Pam Jenoff**

After discovering an abandoned, photograph-filled suitcase in Grand Central Station in 1946 a young widow sets out to discover who the people in the pictures are.



***The Lost Wife* by Alyson Richman**

During the last moments of calm in prewar Prague, Lenka, a young art student, and Josef, who is studying medicine, fall in love. With the promise of a better future, they marry--only to have their dreams shattered by the imminent Nazi invasion. Like so many others, they are torn apart by the currents of war.