



The Briar Club
By Kate Quinn

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Discussion Questions

1. Grace March is the catalyst for everything that happens at Briarwood House. Do you see her as a benevolent force, a manipulator, or something in between? Did her methods for bringing the women together justify the deception of her hidden identity?
2. Each woman in the Briar Club is battling her own demons from the past. Whose personal history did you find the most compelling or surprising?
3. Let's talk about Arlene Hupp. For much of the book, she's the antagonist. By the end, did your opinion of her change? Did she deserve Grace's final act of kindness?
4. Compare the relationships of Nora and Xavier with Bea and Harland. Both men operate within systems of law and order (or crime). What do these two very different relationships reveal about love, loyalty, and what each woman was looking for in a partner?
5. Briarwood House itself acts as a narrator in the interstitial sections. What did you think of this choice? Did it add a unique layer to the story for you, or did you find it distracting?
6. Pete Nilsson undergoes a profound transformation throughout the book. What do you think was the single most important event or relationship that shaped his journey?
7. Near the end, Grace says, "I have always been a friend. To all of you." Do you believe her? Was her friendship genuine from the start, or did it become real over time as she lived her new life?
8. Did you believe Harland Adams would have turned Grace in if the other women hadn't argued so persuasively? What did his internal conflict say about the struggle between duty to country and duty to conscience during that era?
9. The inclusion of recipes at the end of each section is an unusual touch. Did this add to your enjoyment of the book? Did you see the food as just a cozy detail, or did it represent something more, like nourishment, community, or care?
10. Fliss Orton's quiet battle with postpartum depression feels very contemporary. Why do you think the author chose to include this storyline, and what does it reveal about the hidden struggles of women, even in the supposedly idyllic 1950s?

Author Interview

NICOLE EVELINA: How would you describe *The Briar Club*?

KATE QUINN: In a nutshell, it's about a group of very different women who live under the same roof at an all-female boarding house in early 1950s Washington DC. With the arrival of a mysterious Iowa widow who moves into the attic room and begins a weekly supper club, the women begin to realize they have friendship and support to offer each other...but they also come to realize that they all have secrets. And an explosion of violence on Thanksgiving 1954 brings all the secrets to light.

This book is different from my last few in that it doesn't center around a war. But it still has the common Kate Quinn themes of a mystery thread that pulls throughout, found family supporting each other, and badass women doing badass things!

NE: What drew you to this story? What was your inspiration?

KQ: *The Briar Club* came together out of pandemic-year loneliness plus a footnote from my husband's undergraduate degree. In "Alone in the Kitchen with an Eggplant" from the superb essay collection *Home Cooking*, food writer Laurie Colwin wrote with humor and heart about her years as a broke twenty-something living in a broom-closet sized apartment in New York, managing to feed her equally broke friends from a kitchenette consisting of a mini-fridge, a hot-plate, and a dish-rack parked in the bathroom.

I reread that essay a lot during the pandemic, whimpering—I'd have happily cooked on a hot-plate and drained spaghetti in my bathtub if I could be surrounded by loved ones, scraped plates, and half-empty bottles of wine. "Could this be a book?" I thought. "Stranger comes to town, pulls housemates together with weekly dinners in her tiny apartment?" Pretty low stakes for a Kate Quinn book, though; nobody getting bombed, arrested, or shot. And then my husband (whose degree work was in International Relations/Foreign Security and Intelligence, with a focus on post-World War II eastern Europe through the post-Soviet bloc) casually dropped a tidbit about the Cold War that made the entire book come together in my head in one big lightbulb flash: a supper club and a mysterious stranger cooking dinner for her friends, all pulled together with one big McCarthy-era twist.

NE: What made you decide to make the house itself a character?

KQ: That was an inspiration that came quite late in the process! I've always believed that places can very much have personalities, and since this book is tied so firmly to the theme of "what makes a house into a home?" it seemed natural to give the house a quite literal personality. The frame of this book (which involves the unfolding investigation of a murder in the house) was originally told from the point-of-view of the detective on duty, but police procedural stuff bores me, and I realized I wasn't interested in the detective. So I put all those framing scenes

into the point-of-view of the house itself, commenting on the drama unfolding within its walls and very much invested in the outcome for the people who live inside.

NE: What are some of the themes in the book?

KQ: No one ever knows what is going on in someone else's life. That has always been true, and it's even more true now when we're treated to carefully curated visions of the lives of others through social media, when generally only the good and the photogenic is presented for the public eye. In *The Briar Club*, the point of view rotates in turn through each of the women who live at the boarding house, so the reader becomes acquainted with each woman first as the others think of her...and then the truth of how she thinks of herself.

NE: What do you hope that readers will take away from this book?

KQ: I hope that when people finish reading it, they've found a story they loved full of women they admire. And I hope they have food for thought about what it means to be American and how we can be proud of our homeland but temper that pride with the knowledge of where we've gone wrong and how we can do better in future.

NE: Why did you decide to switch from World War II historical fiction to 1950s-1960s mystery?

KQ: I wanted to move away from the world wars for the next book, and my attention fell on the 1950s because I've always found it an interesting decade. It's seen by many as an idyllic (or boring, or repressive, depending on who you ask) period of peace and domesticity between the war-driven upheaval of the forties and the social upheaval of the sixties.

But as with most outwardly peaceful periods of history, there's a lot going on under the surface: the hangover from World War II is far from over, and the desire for social change is coming to a boil even if its effects won't be seen for a few years yet. The US seemed like the best location to set a fifties book: America was very much taking the lead during that decade—prosperous where so much of the rest of the world was rebuilding from war, eager to lead in everything from scientific advancement to the space-race, but still backward in many other ways: segregation and racism still rampant; women hamstrung in the workplace and pushed into the feminine ideal of the fifties housewife; anti-communist fervor leading to witch-hunts where innocent people's lives were destroyed because of what they believed or who they knew. Lots of grist for a story!

Author Biography

Kate Quinn is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of historical fiction. A native of southern California, she attended Boston University where she earned a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Classical Voice. She has written four novels in the Empress of Rome Saga, and two books in the Italian Renaissance, before turning to the 20th century with "The Alice Network", "The Huntress," "The Rose Code," "The Diamond Eye," and "The Briar Club." She is also a co-author in several collaborative novels including "The Phoenix Crown" with Janie Chang and "Ribbons of Scarlet" with Stephanie Dray, Laura Kamoie, Eliza Knight, Sophie Perinot, and Heather Webb. "The Astral Library," releasing in 2025, is her first foray into magical realism. Kate and her husband now live in Maryland with their two rescue dogs.

Reviews

If you have read my past reviews, you know I am a big fan of Kate Quinn. While “The Briar Club” is different from her previous historical fiction, I found her latest book captivating.

Her other novels are set during a war. This novel is set in Washington, D.C. during the Cold War when Sen. Joseph McCarthy became a tireless crusader against Communist spies who might be living in the United States. It was a time of political repression and persecution of left-wing individuals and a campaign spreading fear of communism during the late 1940s and through the 1950s. Many were afraid of being falsely accused. All the characters in the novel are well researched and based on real people. Quinn does an excellent job of bringing the McCarthy era to life.

“The Briar Club” opens with the Briarwood House telling the story. On Thanksgiving Day, the police are knocking on the door. The house has a lot of blood and two dead bodies, one upstairs and one down, with 17 suspects who have had too much rum punch.

First the house must back up four years to fill in the blanks. Briarwood is a run-down, all-female boarding house set in Washington, D.C. in 1950. No one would suspect that Briarwood House has secrets hidden behind its white picket fence. But Briarwood has plenty. At first, all the women keep to themselves until widow Grace March moves into the attic. She draws the ladies in for potluck dinners on Thursday nights while the grouchy landlady goes to play bridge. The residents include the landlady’s two children, an older Hungarian refugee, a woman working for the National Archives in love with a gangster, a poised young English mother whose doctor husband is stationed overseas, a former baseball star from the women’s baseball league of World War II and a real-life secretary to the Maine senator who goes up against McCarthy, a secretary for House Un-American Activities Committee.

As they grow closer over meals and plenty of gin, the residents share their stories with each other. But they are all holding something back. This is a compelling story of women’s friendships during a frightening time. While this book has so many characters that one might think they could be confusing, Quinn does an excellent job of making sure they have very distinct characteristics and personalities, along with their secrets.

From: <https://www.cullmantribune.com/2024/08/18/book-review-the-briar-club-by-kate-quinn/>

Bestseller Quinn follows *The Diamond Eye* with a stellar historical mystery centered on a group of women living together in a Washington, D.C., boardinghouse. The action opens on Thanksgiving 1956 at Briarwood House, where a corpse lies bleeding in one of the attic apartments, the police have just arrived, and the tenants have gathered in the living room to await questioning. The narrative then rewinds four and a half years, to when widowed 30-something Grace March arrives at Briarwood. She meets Fliss, a harried new mother; Bea, a former pro baseball player; Claire, a file clerk for Sen. Margaret Chase Smith; Nora, an employee of the National Archives; and Arlene, a secretary for the House Un-American Activities Committee who’s fully embraced the hysterical rhetoric of her boss, Sen. Joseph

McCarthy. As the women bond, clash, and pursue various romantic entanglements, they remain committed to holding weekly dinner parties in Grace's room. As Quinn gradually steers the narrative back toward the violent opening scene, she elegantly explores issues of race, class, and gender, and brings the paranoid atmosphere of McCarthy-era Washington to vivid life. For Quinn's fans, this is a must.

From: <https://www.publishersweekly.com/9780063244740>

Read-Alikes

The House of Eve by Sadeqa Johnson

Fifteen-year-old Ruby Pearsall is on track to becoming the first in her family to attend college, in spite of having a mother more interested in keeping a man than raising her daughter. But a taboo love affair threatens to pull her back down into the poverty and desperation that has been passed onto her like a birthright. Eleanor Quarles arrived in Washington, DC with ambition and secrets. When she meets the handsome William Pride at Howard University, they fall madly in love. But William hails from one of DC's elite wealthy Black families, and his parents don't just let anyone into their fold. Eleanor hopes that a baby will make her finally feel at home in William's family and grant her the life she's been searching for. But having a baby, and fitting in, is easier said than done. The lives of these two women collide in the most unexpected way as they both face life altering decisions.

Anywhere You Run by Wanda M. Morris

After the murder of a white man in Jim Crow Mississippi, two Black sisters run away to different parts of the country...But can they escape the secrets they left behind? Two sisters on the run--one from the law, the other from social shame. What they don't realize is that there's a man hot on their trails. This man has his own brand of dark secrets and a disturbing motive for finding the sisters that is unknown to everyone but him.