



HISTORICAL FICTION AUTHOR

Author's Commentary Bonus Feature

Warning: Spoilers ahead! No matter how tempting, don't read the rest of this document until you are reading the corresponding letters. Or wait until you've finished the whole book, if you prefer.

Prologue

Letter from Jo to Charles Donohue, January 26, 1945

About halfway through my writing, I decided to make this book a long flashback by starting with a letter from 1945. At the time, I was just as interested in finding out how Johanna came to be accused of treason as (I hope) you were, since I never write with an extensive outline and wasn't sure of any of the details.

Chapter One

Letter from Major Davies, January 1944

Major Davies's fondness for exclamation marks made it into my publisher's style guide, warning the copy editor that his overuse was intentional and not to change them. By my (not super thorough) count, in his five letters, he used thirty-eight of them...that's about 1/3 of the total exclamation points in the entire book! (!!!)

Chapter Two

Note from Johanna's father, February 21, 1944

I dedicated this book to my parents, and this note is one of the reasons why. I understand why authors give their main characters difficult family relationships—it creates lots of interesting conflict—but what I love about Mr. and Mrs. Berglund is that, while they occasionally have different plans for Jo than she has for herself, they love her and stand by her and are some of the most well-adjusted, functional fictional parents you'll ever meet.

Letter from Jo to the Lutheran Daughters of the Reformation, February 22, 1944

There really was a group called the Lutheran Daughters of the Reformation in a small Minnesota town that held a fundraiser for the USO, which inspired my fictional group. I thought the name was so amusing that I had to use it.

Chapter Three

Guidelines from the Office of Censorship, March 13, 1944, p. 70

Most of the rules listed here are accurate to training censors...except for the request that local camps do their own censorship work. I added that for the sake of the story, but most camps likely sent the mail to the regional censorship office instead. For a while, even comments about the weather were censored, before guidelines became more relaxed.

Chapter Four

Letter from Jo to Peter, April 13, 1944, p. 109

People really did get angry in one Minnesota town when POWs got ham for Easter, and the newspaper exposé later reported on the changed menus to quell the outburst. While it's understandable in a time of rationing, outrage over trivial things certainly isn't new.

Chapter Five

Helmut's Potato Brigade article, April 22, 1944, p. 118

The story Helmut tells about a POW being shot in the head while running to get a soccer ball occurred at Camp Concordia, Kansas. Witnesses gave conflicting statements about whether a warning was shouted, but either way, the event led to civilians being evacuated from the camp as the furious POWs marched up and down the streets of the camp, singing and shouting in German to protest. Within 48 hours, the situation calmed down, but the combination of an incompetent camp commander and a secret regime of Nazis running prisoners' lives behind the scenes gave that camp a reputation as the worst in the country.

Letter from Peter to Jo, April 22, 1944, p. 123

Dye Ogato was a real soldier, and his whole bombing story is close to the actual record of how he got a Purple Heart. I wanted to sneak in some actual stories from the men trained at the MIS language school because I admire them so much.

Chapter Six

Letter from Pastor Sorenson to Major Davies, May 3, 1944, p. 141

This is the only letter that made me cry while writing it. I wrote it for all the Pastor Sorensons out there who have had to make difficult choices, risk being misunderstood, and forgive before being asked.

Letter from Heinz Werner to Stefan, April 21, 1944, p. 167

I never outright state it in the book, but I later mention that Minister of Propaganda, Josef Goebbels, bears the nickname “Hitler’s Megaphone,” and readers familiar with WWII might know that Hitler himself was nicknamed “the Wolf.” So, Stefan’s inquiry, and his father’s reply, about how the Wolves are doing isn’t so innocent as Jo might have assumed.

Chapter Seven

Frank’s editorial, June 10, 1944, p. 183

As I wrote this book, I visited the Holocaust Museum in Washington D.C. Many of the exhibits were deeply moving, but one that stuck with me were the guides used to check German hair and eyes, arranged light to dark. Knowing Johanna was a blue-eyed blond Norwegian, the stark hierarchy of features seemed like it would fit into the story. It also gave me an excuse to create Frank. His haircutting advertisements added a little light to an otherwise very serious subject.

Chapter Eight

Letter from Pastor Sorenson to Jo, July 25, 1944, p. 221

Pastor Sorenson’s character was inspired by Reverend John Ames, the narrator of another epistolary novel I love, *Gilead*.

Chapter Nine

Letter from Jo to Olive, never sent, September 23, 1944, p. 265

This one broke my heart, because Jo is close to being able to express what she feels...and she doesn’t. It was inspired by several heartfelt letters I wrote my senior year of high school thanking friends, teachers, and even some near-strangers for what they meant to me. But I never sent them. I call them the Dead Letters, and I’ve resolved never to add to them again. I wanted Jo to learn: even when it feels vulnerable and scary, say the words.

Chapter Ten

Potato Brigade article by Raymond Harrison, October 28, 1944, p. 282

I first discovered the *Negro Motorist Green Book* because I was looking up my own last name origins, and the author (Victor Hugo Green, does it get better than that?) was on a list of famous Greens. In its early days, it relied on tips from Green’s fellow mail carriers, who know their city well, to list hotels, restaurants, and even private homes that would allow African American

customers. Take some time to research this fascinating piece of history—you'll hear stories of fear, but also of hope.

Chapter Eleven

Letter from Howard Hong to Johanna, November 15, 1944, p. 318

Dr. Hong, a historical figure, really had a sign that said "Redeem the time" in his office. It's a motto I've thought of often, especially since the final edits of this book took place during shelter at home during the pandemic, when everything else was cancelled, a situation that (while very different) came closer to POW captivity than I ever thought I'd be.

Letter from Jo to Peter, November 19, 1944, p. 323

Since I wrote this book out of order and had no idea what I'd use this for, plot-wise, the original purpose of the costume ball was almost entirely to talk about Cornelia Knutson dressed as Joan of Arc on fire. Because she's hilarious and I love her.

Chapter Twelve

Ironside Broadside article, November 20, 1994, p. 331

The escape in this book was modeled in some ways on the longest and most dramatic of the POW escapes from Minnesota's camps, near Bena, MN. There, two POWs also left a misleading note after escaping into the November cold, but they traveled by raft, thinking, absurdly, that they'd paddle down the Mississippi to Mexico.

Chapter Thirteen

Speech from Carl Berglund, January 2, 1945, p. 363

Before edits, I had the citizens arguing for a recall of their mayor. In my research, I found that the majority of states passed laws allowing for recall elections during the reform period after WWI. Great, I thought, proceeding as planned. Until my editor asked me to confirm, and I realized after looking more specifically that Minnesota had no process for recalling an elected official until...1996. So I switched it to people applying public pressure to poor Carl to resign.

Postscript

Letter from Jo to Peter, February 22, 1945, p. 375

I got to work in a reference to hot dishes! It's a deeply Minnesotan thing to call certain kinds of casserole a "hot dish." A staple of every Lutheran church potluck, they come in many varieties,

but usually involve starch, a condensed soup, and cheese. Imagine my delight to find the term was first used in cookbooks in the late 1930s.

Letter from Jo to Cornelia, March 4, 1945, p. 386

One day, a group of friends and I were discussing what it looks like to show empathy to people who you know are wrong. One friend continued that conversation afterward via text because we still had more to say, and I lifted most of one of Jo's most profound lines, from him: "I've seen the best and the worst of this little town, and I've realized it's made of people with their own prejudices and priorities and fears—just like me. We're all just fallible people trying desperately to make sense of an incomprehensibly complex world." That friend and I started dating soon after, and now we're married.

Letter from Peter to Jo, March 1, 1945, p. 393

The introduction to this letter is almost word for word the directions to POWs in Japanese camps when they were caught avoiding the Red Cross policy of registering prisoners. Conditions in these camps were unimaginable, and accounts of them were horrible to read. Peter, being captured late in the war, was likely spared many of this, but his letter was also more optimistic due to concern that his captors would read and censor it than an honest letter would have been. Still...it was delightful to write these last letters, knowing that my two favorite fictional people (who are perfect for each other) would get their second chance. I adore the way Peter affirms and encourages Jo, and the way Jo challenges Peter where he needs it.