

PAM JENOFF

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF  
*THE LOST GIRLS OF PARIS*

THE  
WOMAN  
WITH THE  
BLUE STAR

A NOVEL

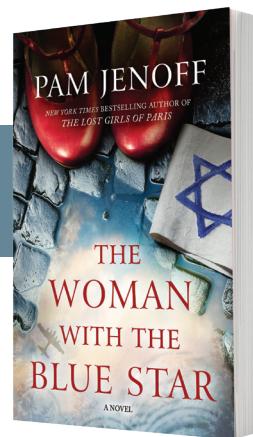


# Discussion Guide

## A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader:

**The Woman with the Blue Star** is a novel that comes from so many deep places for me. The story originates, as so many of my books do, from my love and reverence for the people who lived through the Holocaust, born out of the years I spent in Eastern Europe working on Holocaust issues. The inspiration derives from an amazing true story I discovered of Jews who survived the war in the sewer of Lviv, Poland. The setting of my book, Krakow, emanates from my everlasting love for the city where I lived and which had such a profound impact on me. And the resonance of this particular tale stems from writing about isolation and the drive for human connection during a period when we have all been very much isolated and apart due to the pandemic.



My novel begins when a young woman on the brink of adulthood must do the unfathomable: she flees to the sewer with her father and pregnant mother, forced to live in horrific conditions for months to evade the Nazis. One day through the sewer grate she spies a girl her own age buying flowers, and she is struck by the disparity in their situations. Their eyes meet, the women speak to one another, and thus begins a friendship with deep and dangerous consequences that will reverberate across nearly a century.

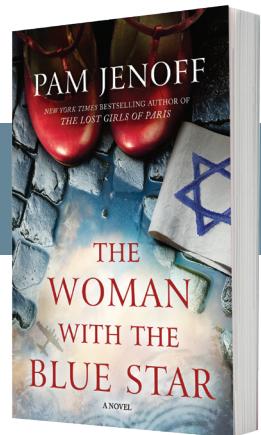
I hope you find **The Woman with the Blue Star** to be both timely and timeless. My wish is that you will see a bit of yourself in my characters and their harrowing but rewarding journey, and that you will find hope and inspiration for your own life. I am grateful to each of you, whether you are new to my books or you have traveled with me through the years. Thank you from the bottom of my heart!

Warmly,

Pam Jenoff

# Discussion Guide

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION



- 1) Who did you identify with more, Sadie or Ella? Why?
- 2) Why do you think Sadie and Ella were drawn to one another so powerfully?
- 3) What parallels can you draw between Sadie's and Ella's lives and the very unique time we are living in today?
- 4) Sadie and Ella were both shaken from their lives from the war and thrust into new experiences that changed and challenged them. Can you describe a similar time in your own life?
- 5) Do you agree with Sadie's choices? Ella's? Why or why not? What, if anything, would you have done differently?
- 6) Were you surprised by the end of the book? Satisfied? Or did you wish it had turned out differently?
- 7) What are some of the key themes of the book?
- 8) Describe some of the family dynamics of the story.
- 9) The sewer was a very unique setting. What was your reaction to it?
- 10) Isolation and connection were among the key themes of this book. Discuss how they affected the story.
- 11) Did you learn anything new about history that surprised you from this book?

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## Q&A WITH PAM JENOFF

**The Woman with the Blue Star was inspired by true events. Can you share more about the true-life story and why you chose to use it as the basis for your novel?**

While looking for an idea for my next book, I discovered the incredible story of a group of Jewish people who had hidden from the Nazis by living for many months in the sewers of Lviv, Poland. There was one particularly moving story where a young girl in the sewer had looked up through the grate and seen a young girl buying flowers. When she remarked on the disparity between the girl on the street and herself, her mother said, "Someday there will be flowers." I was struck by the horrific circumstances which they endured, as well as their ingenuity and resilience in surviving there. I was also moved by the selflessness of those who helped them, most notably a sewer worker, and by their search for human connection in such a dark and isolated place. I decided to write a story which fictitiously looks at a young woman in the sewer and the friendship she develops with a woman whom she sees on the street, and the ways in which this changes both of their lives.

After twenty-five years of studying World War II and the Holocaust, when I find a story that makes me gasp, I know I am onto something that will make my readers feel the same way. This was certainly the case with the true inspiration for *The Woman With The Blue Star*.

**Setting part of the novel in an underground sewer system must have been so challenging. Tell us about some of the research you did and how you approached that part of the story line.**

Immersing myself in the world where my story is set, whether the circus in *The Orphan's Tale* or the sewer in *The Woman with the Blue Star*, is always one of the most rewarding and challenging aspects of beginning a book. I had so many questions: What did the sewer look and feel like? How was it possible to eat and sleep and even see in the dark underground space? Fortunately, there was an excellent nonfiction book, *In The Sewers of Lvov* by Robert Marshall, that explained so much of it. I learned that there were so many dangers beyond getting caught by the Germans, from drowning to starvation to floods. Every day was a battle for survival.

When I decided to move the story to Krakow, Poland (where I had lived for several years), I planned a research trip there. Those plans were scuttled by the pandemic, but I am lucky enough to still have good friends there who put me in touch with experts on the sewer and the city to help me get it right.

**What do you hope readers will take away from the story of Sadie and Ella?**

Sadie and Ella, two women from completely different worlds, form a deep bond that has profound and lasting consequences. I hope readers will see in them the ways in which we can transcend our differences and connect. I also hope readers recognize the ways in which reaching out to someone, even in the smallest or most fleeting way, can have a tremendous impact on that person's life as well as his or her own.

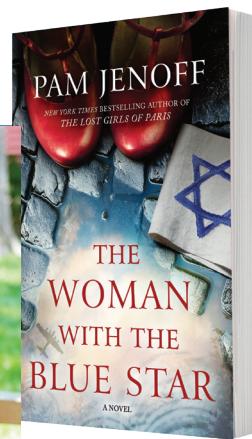
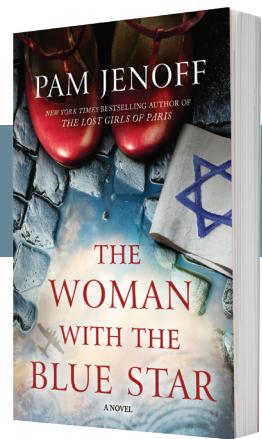


Photo Credit: Mindy Schwartz Sorasky

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**The ending was such a surprise! When you started the book, did you know how you wanted the book to end?**

Well, I'm a "pantser" and that means I write by the seat of my pants and not from an outline, at least most of the time. So I don't have a neat idea of where the book will go. I have an opening image and some general idea of where I will wind up and if I am lucky there are one or two high moments that I can see along the way, like lighthouses to guide me. But I am sometimes surprised by the end, and that was certainly the case with *The Woman with the Blue Star*. That "Aha!" moment when you realize it is all going to come together is just one of the best feelings ever.

**You wrote the novel while in lockdown during the pandemic. What was that experience like?**

I was writing this book when the pandemic hit and the whole world seemed turned on its head. For a while I was not able to write at all. But when I did return to the page, the experience was like a homecoming and returning to my beloved writing world has been part of what has kept me going. I've learned just how important writing is to me. It helps to keep me well and whole.

I also found a number of unexpected parallels between *The Woman with the Blue Star* and the pandemic. While our present situation does not begin to approach the horrors people faced during the Holocaust, our lives were changed unexpectedly last year and we had to find new ways to live and get food and the things we needed, and to raise and educate our children. There was also a kind of symmetry in the ways in which people seek and manage to find human connection despite isolating circumstances. I hope that readers will draw strength from reading about the remarkable individuals in my book.

**We love hearing about how authors do their work. Do you have a special writing routine, a favorite location, a lucky charm?**

I find that my writing routine has evolved over the years. For example, at one point I went into my office to write, at another I went to a coffee shop. Now sometimes I am on the couch. I have written in castles and mountain getaways, but I have also written in my doctor's waiting room and in my car. There are certain constants, though. I love the early morning and I write from five to seven every day if I am able to. I just love getting that first burst in before the day gets hectic. I am a short burst writer, which means I have no stamina. If you give me eight hours in a day, I don't know what to do with that. I would much rather have one hour seven days per week. And as much caffeine as possible!

**Can you tell us anything about what you're working on next?**

My new book is set in Belgium and inspired by the incredible true story of a train carrying prisoners to Auschwitz that was ambushed by resistance fighters. It's a story of unbelievable courage.