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LOVE, LIES & 'Doctor Zhivago'



Lara Prescott's *The Secrets We Kept* is a sensational tale of spies, Soviet Russia and one extraordinary love affair

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Unveiling the CIA book club



For years Lara Prescott hated her first name because people so often mispronounced or misspelled it. Today, she's thankful, because it seems to have led directly to the publication of her debut novel—one she was practically born to write.

Lara Prescott's first name was inspired by her mother's love of both Boris Pasternak's 1957 Russian novel *Doctor Zhivago*, a love story about Dr. Yuri Zhivago and Lara Antipova that spans the Russian Revolution and World War II, and the epic film adaptation by David Lean.

Naturally, Prescott always felt a connection to the tale, and now she's written **The Secrets We Kept**, a fictional account of how Pasternak wrote his Nobel Prize winner—and how the CIA used it as political propaganda during the Cold War.

"My mother definitely takes credit for the book after having named me Lara," Prescott jokes, speaking from her home in Austin, Texas.

Prescott's deft treatment of this little-known, stranger-than-fiction saga could hardly be more fascinating, and it's sure to be a blockbuster, having reportedly sold for \$2 million at auction. The deal unfolded just as Prescott graduated with an MFA from the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas at Austin, with her manuscript as her thesis.

"It was an almost unbelievable experience that I don't think sunk in for months and months," she recalls. "It has been life-changing and will continue to be."

It's hardly a stretch to say that Prescott's first novel was a lifetime in the making. Growing up in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, she enjoyed watching the film *Doctor Zhivago* with her family and sought it out anytime it played at the local theater. In high school she tackled the novel, although she admits, "It's not the easiest Russian novel to sink your teeth into." Nonetheless, she found herself "having a connection to the words and the story," and she says she sees

new meaning every time she rereads it.

The tipping point came in 2014 when her father emailed her a *Washington Post* article about how the CIA secretly helped publish and distribute Russian editions of the novel, which was first given out at the 1958 world's fair in Brussels. (A miniature paperback edition followed, many of which were given out at the 1959 World Youth Festival in Vienna.) The early CIA was pretty liberal, Prescott explains, with many recruits believing art and literature could be used to show Soviet citizens the freedoms and lack of censorship enjoyed by Americans, in contrast to their own government. As she writes in her fictional account, "The Agency became a bit of a book club with a black budget."

"It was almost the direct opposite of what the rest of the government was doing at the time—the FBI and the Red Scare and all of those things," Prescott says. "They were definitely at odds with each other."

Wanting to know more about the bookish mission, which was classified under code name "AEDINOSAUR," Prescott began devouring newly released CIA documents. As she read so many of the names and places that had been redacted from these pages, she felt as though the many participants had "been pretty much erased from history except for the men who signed at the bottom of the secret document." She began to wonder about the people who "typed these reports and memos and knew the secrets of these secret keepers." She researched the roles women played in the early CIA, most often as typists, secretaries and record keepers, but sometimes spies as well. Suddenly a novel began to emerge.

"The first voice that came to me was the voice of the typists," Prescott recalls. "It was one of those things that has never happened to me before. I heard the voice in my head in the middle of the night, and I emailed myself a few lines. This was the very first thing I wrote."

She chronicles the lively office pool through this collective voice—their work, lives, loves and gossip—such as in her seemingly heaven-sent opening: "We typed a hundred words per minute and never missed a syllable. Our identical desks were each equipped

with a mint-shelled Royal Quiet Deluxe typewriter, a black Western Electric rotary phone, and a stack of yellow steno pads. Our fingers flew across the keys."

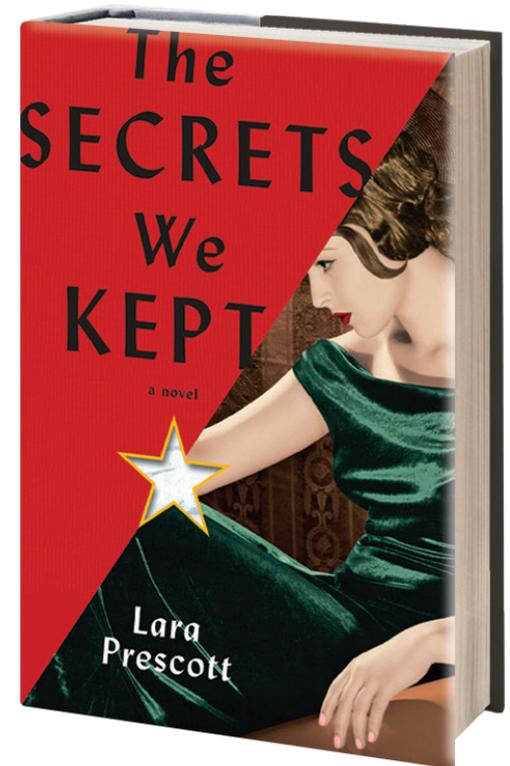
Having worked as a political campaigner in Washington, D.C., Prescott says she felt "a personal connection to these women," adding, "You have these men in positions of power at the CIA—unchecked power, really—and women who could only reach a certain level. I wanted to explore these power dynamics, which often, unfortunately, still exist."

Two characters soon rose to the forefront, both of whom narrate chapters of their own. There's CIA newbie Irina Drozdova, a Russian American, and Sally Forrester, a former OSS agent and spy tasked with training Irina. As Sally notes, being a "keeper of secrets" is a "power that some, myself included, found more intoxicating than any drug, sex, or other means of quickening one's heartbeat."

Initially planning to write only about these female spies, Prescott soon realized that this was only half the story. It felt equally essential to chronicle the intricate saga of what was happening in Russia: how *Doctor Zhivago* was written; how Pasternak's mistress, Olga Ivinskaya, inspired the character of Lara; how the Russian government forbid the novel's publication and persecuted Pasternak; and how Ivinskaya was twice sent to the Gulag for her involvement with the literary giant.

"I wanted to give Olga a voice that I think she's been denied throughout history," Prescott says, "and make people aware of this woman behind the famous man." The project grew into an "obsession," Prescott says. Her research was extensive, taking her to libraries galore; to Oxford, England, where she spoke with Pasternak's niece; and to the dacha outside of Moscow where Pasternak wrote his masterpiece. It's now a museum, and the author is buried in a nearby cemetery. Prescott describes standing at Pasternak's grave as "a profound experience, one I will never forget."

In the end, Prescott ties this world-spanning novel together with aplomb. With multiple narrators and two riveting but complicated plotlines set on opposite sides of the globe, **The Secrets We Kept** abounds with not only intrigue but also plenty of joy, heartbreak and, yes, humor.



The Secrets We Kept
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Historical Fiction

"I love books that deal with very serious topics and tragic circumstances but never lose sight of the humor," Prescott says. "That is part of life. And that gallows humor is really important, especially in Russian culture."

Ironically, when Prescott began her project, several publishing insiders informed her that readers were no longer particularly interested in Russia. Little could she anticipate how topical her novel would be when the 2016 presidential election helped to bring the Soviet Union back into the headlines. "After researching how the Cold War unfolded and [about] tactics that both the Americans and the Soviets used," she muses, "I can't help but think that, of course this has never ended. Why would it have?"

She cautions that she never intended to write a good-guy-versus-bad-guy, East-versus-West story, and further notes, "I continue to be fascinated with how words are used to change the hearts and minds of citizens, whether it be through books, as they did in the Cold War, or in the current climate in which tweets and fake news have the same effect."

—Alice Cary