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## In Lara Prescott's 'The Secrets We Kept,' the CIA takes a novel approach to Cold War spycraft

By Joan Frank

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Lara Prescott's ambitious debut novel, "The Secrets We Kept," arrives with a boatload of preemptive, promotional fanfare. What nudges hype aside — as usual — is taste. Are you a fan of noirish narrative? Multilayered, intertwined plots? Imagined scenes and conversations mixed with real reportage? Strong, smart women battling tricky cultural, economic and political mores?

Bonus question: Did you enjoy "Dr. Zhivago" (either the film or the book)?

If you answered yes to all the above, you will like "Secrets." A lot.



"Secrets" unspools several concurrent stories, alternately from the "West" (mainly Washington, D.C.) and "East" (Russia), during the fateful, freighted years 1949 through 1961. Each story runs alongside, or proves tangential to, that of the tormented, flawed, gifted Russian author Boris Pasternak, concentrating on the period when Pasternak was struggling to get "Zhivago" published and the fatal cost of the ordeal to his health, especially after he was forced to refuse a Nobel Prize for the novel under totalitarian harassment.

Significantly, these are women's stories. Pasternak's, while not marginal, is told by his longtime mistress and muse, Olga Ivinskaya — she who inspired "Zhivago's" famous romantic lead, Lara (for whom Prescott happens to be named). Sent twice to a Gulag labor camp (described in horrific detail) as a result of her affiliation with him, Olga's own astonishing account nearly eclipses his.

But that story, while gripping, provides only a piece of the action. "Secrets" opens, intriguingly, with a *recitatif* by a pool of female typists in the Office of Strategic Services (forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency) in the 1950s:

"We'd sit in small chairs pushed into the corners while [the men would] sit behind their large mahogany desks or pace the carpet. ... We'd listen. We'd record. We were their audience of one for their memos, reports, write-ups, lunch orders. ... Sometimes they'd refer to us not by name but by hair color or body type. ... They would call us girls, but we were not."

American-born Sally Forrester and Russian-born Irina Drozdova graduate from mere typing to daring covert work — and much more. Each narrates in turn. Here's younger Sally in early wartime, aboard a ship shuttling GIs to the front. "We were the kind of girls who'd grown up reading *Treasure Island* and *Robinson Crusoe*. ... We bonded over the belief that a life of adventure wasn't reserved for men, and we set out to claim our piece of it." It's Sally, too, who concisely summarizes the savvy

awareness of femme fatale operatives: “These men thought they were using me, but it was always the reverse; my power was making them think it wasn’t.”

Prescott’s hard-boiled depiction of D.C.’s intelligence community — its social and sexual hierarchies — gives readers a gritty insider-tour of a “Mad Men”-redolent world where women had to work doubly hard to be taken as serious players, effectively doing everything backward and in heels. (Plenty of glamorous skulking occurs in hotels and bars, and much gets accomplished between hangovers.) Such is the thoroughness of Prescott’s research and the crispness of her delivery that the novel reads almost like a documentary, itemizing cultural milestones and emblems (Nat King Cole, Sputnik, Alka-Seltzer) alongside women’s courageous contributions to postwar heroism. Her details vibrate with authority. Some of the typing pool, for instance, turn out to be retired operatives:



“During the war, [Betty] ran black ops, striking blows at opposition morale by planting newspaper articles and dropping propaganda flyers from airplanes.” Virginia “named her prosthetic leg Cuthbert, and if she had too many drinks, she’d take it off and hand it to you. ...[Once] she disguised herself as a milkmaid and led a herd of cows and two French Resistance fighters to the border.”

Sally, Irina and Olga are distinct, dimensional and complex voices; their arcs compelling and sometimes surprising (reversals, losses, double-crossings). Olga manages to survive labor camps and hold her family together while protecting her adored Borya — who is portrayed here (plausibly) as well-intentioned, somewhat weak, self-immersed and mortally exhausted. The women’s fortunes culminate in an American effort to “weaponize” the controversial Pasternak novel in a technique called “soft-propaganda warfare — using art, music, and literature ... to emphasize how the Soviet system did not allow free thought.”

Thus, “the mission that would change everything” secretly disseminates bootlegged copies of “Zhivago” to Russian citizens (initially to tourists at the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair).

Like most of the seminal events of “Secrets,” this really happened. In the step-by-step of it (marbling the imagined with the real), Prescott sustains a breathless tension.

It is satisfying to witness these women’s evolutions, their stamina, wit and canny determination: enmeshed in multitiered battles for the survival of those principles for which so very, very many sacrificed themselves. Without a speck of sentiment, Prescott has built an impassioned testament to them. Reading “Secrets” affords a pleasurable, inspiring way to absorb unsung history.

**Joan Frank’s** latest books, *“Where You’re All Going: Four Novellas”* and *“Try to Get Lost: Essays on Travel and Place,”* will be published in early 2020.