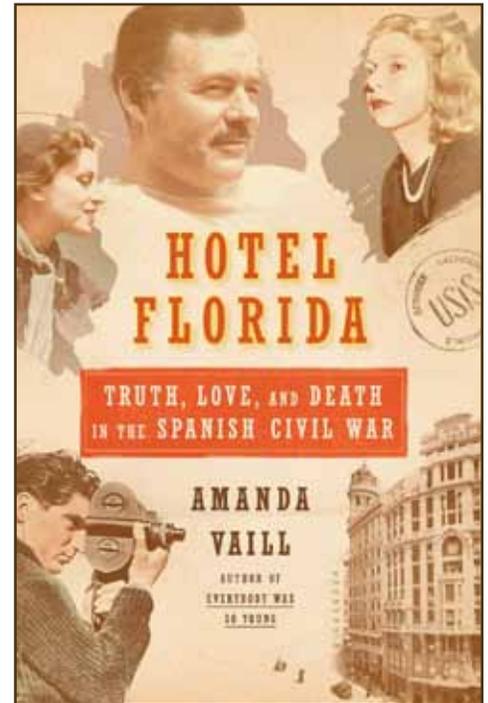


Reading Group Gold

Hotel Florida *Truth, Love, and* *Death in the Spanish* *Civil War* by Amanda Vaill



ISBN: 978-0-374-17299-2 / 464 pages

Madrid, 1936. In a city blasted by a civil war that many fear will cross borders and engulf Europe—a conflict one writer will call “the decisive thing of the century”—six people meet and find their lives changed forever. Ernest Hemingway, his career stalled, his marriage gone sour, hopes that this war will give him fresh material and new romance; Martha Gellhorn, an ambitious novice journalist hungry for love and experience, thinks she will find both with Hemingway in Spain. Robert Capa and Gerda Taro, idealistic young photographers based in Paris, want to capture history in the making, and invent modern photojournalism in the process. And Arturo Barea, the chief of the Spanish government’s foreign press office, and Ilsa Kulcsar, his Austrian deputy, struggle to balance truth-telling with loyalty to their sometimes compromised cause—an effort that places both of them in peril.

Hotel Florida traces the tangled wartime destinies of these three couples against the backdrop of a critical moment in history. As Hemingway put it, “You could learn as much at the Hotel Florida in those years as you could anywhere in the world.” From the raw material of unpublished letters and diaries, official documents, and recovered reels of film, Amanda Vaill has created a narrative of love and reinvention that is, finally, a story about truth: finding it, telling it, and living it—whatever the cost.

We hope that the following discussion topics will enrich your reading group’s experience of this spellbinding story of love amid the devastation of the Spanish Civil War.

Reading Group Gold

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Hotel Florida* focuses on the Spanish Civil War experiences of six extraordinarily talented, courageous individuals. What was it about the social or political backgrounds of these six that drew them to the Loyalist cause? What strengths and flaws did they bring to their work? Who was pragmatic, idealistic, selfish, altruistic?
2. In her opening note, Amanda Vaill writes that *Hotel Florida* is about how each of the main characters relates to the truth—“whether, for each of them, living the truth becomes just as important as telling it, to the world, to each other, and to themselves.” How did each of them tell the truth and live the truth? What is Vaill’s intent in echoing the first line of Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in the first line of *Hotel Florida*?
3. The United States, Britain, and France chose not to become involved in the Spanish Civil War, despite the graphic evidence of civilian suffering contained in dispatches from battered cities and burning villages. Was this a wise policy? What kinds of support might have been provided? How were both sides—the Nationalists and the Loyalists—left politically vulnerable to the German and Russian agendas?
4. Do the relationships between the couples—Ernest Hemingway and Martha Gellhorn, Robert Capa and Gerda Taro, Arturo Barea and Ilsa Kulcsar—seem typical of traditional gender roles and stereotypes of the era? Were Martha, Gerda, and Ilsa at a disadvantage because they were women? Were there advantages they exploited to further their careers? How did their work compare to that of the men they worked alongside?
5. The book contains many descriptions of war correspondents coming under fire during battle—taking notes and photos as shells exploded and soldiers and civilians died. Hemingway, Gellhorn, Capa, and Taro leave Spain but are drawn back repeatedly in spite of the danger. Why? Is it passion for their work, belief in the cause, desire for fame and recognition, empathy for the suffering of their fellow humans, a need to belong to something larger than themselves? Do their reasons change as the war progresses?
6. Arturo Barea is a complex and flawed man of conscience. What were the experiences that changed him from an uncommitted, lazy, “emotional socialist” into the Unknown Voice of Madrid and, ultimately, a successful writer?
7. Each of the six main characters wanted to bear witness to the truth. But each of them also manipulated the truth, not only in support of the Loyalist cause but to satisfy the demands of the organizations they worked for. In the service of truth, how did each of them distort it? Did the ends always justify the means, or were some of their actions blatantly opportunistic or unethical?
8. The photograph known as Falling Soldier, which Capa took in Espejo, is described as one of the most famous photographs in the world. Vaill cites evidence that it probably captured a real event,

Reading Group Gold

but the image may have been staged. Does it matter what really happened, given the impact of the photograph? How did Capa's and Taro's photographs change as the war progressed?

9. When Capa catches himself writing to a friend that "the story is incomplete . . . There was only an alarm, no bombing," he is immediately horrified that he has become a journalist who cares more about the story than the people dying to make it happen. Are there instances of other journalists behaving this way?
10. Ernest Hemingway was a legend in his lifetime and is remembered today as an icon of American literature. He is portrayed as larger-than-life, macho, narcissistic, and given to exaggeration. His friend F. Scott Fitzgerald writes, "He is living in a world so entirely his own that it is impossible to help him." Are there indications in Hemingway's writing from Spain, or in his speeches or comments, that he considers himself to be more a player in the war than a mere documenter of events? When he writes of the "godwonderful housetohouse fighting" in Teruel, what does this reveal about his state of mind? Why is what he calls "the true gen" so important to him? Despite his bombast and self-absorption, is there evidence that he was sincere in his love for Spain and the Spanish people?
11. Imagine the Spanish Civil War with social media such as Twitter and Instagram available to all: correspondents, civilians, politicians, military leaders, and soldiers in the field. What might have been different?
12. Father Leocadio Lobo counsels Arturo Barea and Ilsa Kulcsar, "Talk and write down what you think you know, what you have seen and thought, tell it honestly and speak the truth. Let the others hear and read you, so that they are driven to tell their truth, too. And then you'll lose that pain of yours." What is the pain he is talking about? Did others in the book suffer from it as well?
13. In wartime, politicians, the military, and the media often find themselves uneasily coexisting in a web of truths, half-truths, and lies. What are some examples of this in *Hotel Florida*? How can a propagandist be a truth teller? How can a photograph lie?
14. The Spanish Civil War had historical repercussions beyond Spain and the late 1930s. What were the issues within Spain that started the war? How did Spain become a microcosm for conflicts that were building in other parts of the world? What far-reaching impact did the Nationalist victory have? For example, given the socialist views of many of the American correspondents, might there be a link to the McCarthy-era blacklisting in the United States in the 1950s?
15. By March 1939, with a Nationalist victory a reality, all of the five surviving lead characters had left Spain. How did their experiences during the war influence the rest of their lives? Of the five, who seemed to have gained, and who to have lost, the most?

Reading Group Gold

PRAISE FOR *HOTEL FLORIDA*

“A vivid, well-paced story of the awfulness of war and of the complex motives of those who report on it.” —James Campbell, *The Wall Street Journal*

“Vaill isn’t after anything as quixotic as trying to ‘set the record straight’ on the Spanish Civil War; instead, she delves deeply into the lives of three couples whose chronicling of the war shaped public perception . . . What Vaill seems to be mulling over in this book is the age-old question of what war does to people . . . *Hotel Florida* adds to the cold hard facts—as well as to the enduring mystique—of the Spanish Civil War.” —Maureen Corrigan, NPR’s *Fresh Air*

“Vaill’s considerable accomplishment in *Hotel Florida* stems from her structural strategy to view the Spanish Civil War through the interwoven stories of a sextet of individuals . . . The threads of all these tales ripple with excitement, doom, courage, betrayal, defeat and, of course, love . . . Vaill’s book races forward like a novel, even as it provides a lucid account of a hugely complex and sometimes baffling war.” —Steve Paul, *The Kansas City Star*

“[Vaill] is eminently capable of juggling multiple stories, of making readers care about all her characters . . . [She] has written a powerful account of a country harrowed by war, of a motley collection of talented human beings striding into the gunfire looking for the truth.” —Daniel Dyer, *The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amanda Vaill is the author of the bestselling *Everybody Was So Young: Gerald and Sara Murphy—A Lost Generation Love Story*, which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in biography, and *Somewhere: The Life of Jerome Robbins*, for which she was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship. In addition to writing the screenplay for the Emmy- and Peabody Award-winning public television documentary *Jerome Robbins: Something to Dance About*, she has also written features and criticism for a range of publications, from *Allure* to *The Washington Post Book World*. She lives in New York City. For more information, visit www.amandavaill.com or follow Vaill on Twitter at @amandavaill.

Guide written by Patricia Daneman