

THE PERFUME GARDEN

KATE LORD BROWN

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READING GROUP GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

An acclaimed international bestseller, *The Perfume Garden* is a sensuously written story of lost love, family secrets—and the art of creating a perfect scent.

High in the hills of Valencia, a forgotten house guards its secrets. Untouched since Franco's forces tore through Spain in 1936, the whitewashed walls have crumbled, and the garden, laden with orange blossom, grows wild. Emma Temple is the first to unlock its doors in seventy years. Emma is London's leading perfumier, but her blessed life has taken a difficult turn. Her free-spirited mother, Liberty, who taught her the art of fragrance making, has just passed away. At the same time, she broke up with her long-time lover and business partner, Joe, whose baby she happens to be carrying.

While Joe is in New York trying to sell his majority share in their company, Emma, guided by a series of letters and a key bequeathed to her in Liberty's will, decides to leave her job and travel to Valencia, where she will give birth in the house her mother mysteriously purchased just before her death. The villa is a perfect retreat: redolent with the exotic scents of orange blossom and neroli, dappled with light and with the rich colors of a forgotten time. Emma makes it her mission to restore the place to its former glory. But for her aging grandmother, Freya, a British nurse who stayed in Valencia during Spain's devastating civil war, Emma's new home evokes memories of a terrible secret, a part of her family's past that until now has managed to stay hidden. With two beautifully interwoven narratives and a lush, atmospheric setting, Kate Lord Brown's *The Perfume Garden* is a dramatic, emotional debut that readers won't soon forget.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which storyline did you relate to most, and why – the contemporary or historical?
2. Do the 'real' and entirely fictional characters feel believable? Can you relate to their predicaments?
3. How do ideas about perfume and gardens weave through both storylines?
4. What surprised or shocked you in the story? Did you know about the events of the Spanish Civil War before reading *The Perfume Garden*? What do you think now about the role women played?
5. Why do you think so many ordinary men and women from all over the world joined the International Brigades to fight fascism in Spain?
6. Why do you think people in Spain are still reluctant to talk about the War? Do you think the past should remain buried?

FURTHER READING

General

THE SPANISH LABYRINTH Gerald Brenan

THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR Hugh Thomas

THE BATTLE FOR SPAIN Antony Beevor

Women and children at War

DOVES OF WAR Paul Preston

Wonderful account of four women's contributions to the Spanish Civil War – on both Nationalist and Republican sides

LOS NINOS PERDIDOS DEL FRANQUISMO Vinyes, Armengou & Belis

Also a harrowing documentary

WOMEN'S VOICES FROM THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

Jim Fyrrth and Sally Alexander

Moving accounts from Spanish Medical Aid nurses like Freya

First-hand accounts

HOMAGE TO CATALONIA George Orwell

L'ESPOIR (MAN'S HOPE) André Malraux

A MOMENT OF WAR Laurie Lee

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

How did you become interested in the Spanish Civil War?

We were lucky enough to live in Valencia for three years while my husband learnt to fly. It's a beautiful part of the world – we lived out in the orange groves and mountains where Emma's fictional village is set. I was curious that even the younger generation didn't want to talk about the war, and started reading as much about it as I could.

What about your interest in perfume?

I'm fascinated by fragrance, and wanted to write a book with perfume at its heart. Emma's character was always going to be a perfumer, and Spain is such a rich country in terms of fragrance. When I think about our years there, they are tied up with the scent of neroli in the fields around our house, incense in the churches, saffron and woodsmoke in the cafés out on the Albufera.

Did you find the research for this book difficult?

I did, it was heartbreaking. I couldn't believe this beautiful country that we had grown to love had been through such a terrible time, and that there was still this 'pact of forgetting' in place. I found it devastating, particularly as a mother hearing the accounts of the treatment of the women and innocent children. There were plenty of times when I felt unable to carry on and research yet another devastating battle or atrocity. But, among these were examples of such humanity and courage that I wanted to write this story, and I hope *The Perfume Garden* is uplifting and redemptive.

Why does your work blend fact and fiction?

I'm interested in forgotten histories – Gerda Taro's incredible photographs are a case in point. Quite a few people may have heard of the legendary Robert Capa, but not many know about the remarkable woman who shared his life, or realise that they invented 'the greatest war photographer in the world' between them. I think historical accounts are always partial, and based on interpretation and opinion. From the base of facts, I see where there are gaps in the reports, or unnamed people in photographs. This often gives me space for the fictional framework which interweaves with the true events and people. It's worth stressing that the 'real' characters in my work are works of fiction, only based on the people and their experiences. *The Perfume Garden* references a lot of real people involved with the Spanish Civil War, and it might be interesting for readers to know a bit more about a few of them:

BIOGRAPHIES

TED ALLAN (b Alan Herman, January 26, 1916 – June 29, 1995) prolific Jewish Canadian writer, actor, biographer, playwright, born in Montreal. Political Commissar of the Spanish-Canadian Blood Transfusion Unit during the Spanish Civil War, serving with his friend and mentor Norman Bethune. In 1952 Allan co-published Bethune's biography *The Scalpel, The Sword*. In 1976, Allan earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Writing (Original Screenplay) for *Lies My Father Told Me*.

NORMAN BETHUNE (Henry Norman Bethune, March 3, 1890 – November 12, 1939) Canadian physician and innovator of the mobile transfusion units that saved countless lives during the Spanish Civil War and the Second Sino-Japanese War. Bethune died aged 49 in China, when he cut his finger during an operation and he developed blood poisoning. Bethune came to international attention after Mao Zedong's essay in his memory. Bethune is one of few westerners to be celebrated by statues in China, and he was honoured as a Person of National Historic Significance in Canada.

GERALD BRENAN (Edward FitzGerald "Gerald" Brennan, CBE 1894–1987) British writer, who spent much of his life in Spain. He settled in Yegen, near Granada in 1919 and maintained contact with many of the Bloomsbury Group. His works include *The Spanish Labyrinth: An Account of the Social and Political Background of the Civil War* (1943).

ROBERT CAPA (born Endre Ernő Friedmann (aka André Friedmann) October 22, 1913 – May 25, 1954) legendary photographer and photo-journalist who chronicled five conflicts. Came to Spain with his lover and professional partner Gerda Taro, and David Seymour (Chim) in 1936. Many of their photographs of the SCW were presumed lost, until the mythical 'Mexican Suitcase' resurfaced in the late 1990s. In 1947 founded Magnum Photos with Cartier Bresson and others. The International Centre for Photography in New York, was founded by Capa's brother Cornell Capa (also a photographer) to preserve his legacy. Capa died aged 40 chronicling the Indochina war in Vietnam, when he stepped on a landmine.

JOHN CORNFORD Rupert John Cornford (27 December 1915 – 28 December 1936) English poet. Born in Cambridge, and named after Rupert Brooke, a friend of his parents. During the Spanish Civil War, he both recruited for the International Brigades in Cambridge, and fought in combat. He was killed in Lopera, Cordoba the day after his twenty-first birthday.

FRANCISCO FRANCO (Francisco Franco y Bahamonde, 4 December 1892 – 20 November 1975) Spanish dictator, military leader and head of state. Came to prominence as member of the far-right Falange. Franco and the military staged a coup against the democratically elected Spanish government in 1936. This failed coup developed into the Spanish Civil War. Military aid from Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany ensured Franco's eventual victory. After his death, Spain began its transition to democracy.

RALPH FOX (30th March 1900 – 28 December 1936) British writer and Political Commissar for the British Battalion of the International Brigades. He was killed in action, alongside John Cornford. A contemporary said: 'He died in Spain, defending the light that no writer may dare to let flicker out.'

MARTHA GELLHORN (8 November 1908 – 15 February 1998) American writer, considered by many to be one of the finest war correspondents of the C20. Third wife of Ernest Hemingway (divorced 1945). Described as a ‘cocky, rasp-voiced, chain-smoking maverick’ by a *New York Times* writer, Gellhorn arrived to cover the SCW in early 1937 with a knapsack and \$50. Her reports were, according to the *Washington Post*, ‘much better than Hemingway’s’. Gellhorn committed suicide in 1998.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY (Ernest Miller Hemingway July 21, 1899 – July 2, 1961) American writer, famed for his lean, hard athletic prose and his admiration of equally masculine pursuits – bull fighting, deep sea fishing and big game hunting. Hemingway covered many of the conflicts of the C20, and in 1954 was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Hemingway committed suicide in 1961, shooting himself with his favourite shotgun.

AD IMMS (Augustus Daniel Imms (August 14, 1880 - 3 April 1949) English educator and entomologist. Reader in entomology at Cambridge University, 1931-45, Fellow of Downing College 1940.

LAURIE LEE (Laurence Edward Alan “Laurie” Lee, MBE June 26, 1914 – May 13, 1997) English writer, poet and screenwriter. His most famous work was an autobiographical trilogy: *Cider With Rosie*, *As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning*, and *A Moment of War*. The latter records his experiences with the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War.

QUEIPO DE LLANO (Gonzalo Queipo de Llano y Sierra, 1st Marquess of Queipo de Llano, February 5, 1875 – March 9, 1951) Spanish Army Officer, who fought for Franco’s Nationalists. Remembered for his regular Radio Sevilla broadcasts which recounted the war’s events in brutal, sadistic detail. He often urged his troops to rape and loot at will – notably the night he offered the African troops the women of Madrid as an inducement to victory.

FEDERICO GARCIA LORCA Federico del Sagrado Corazón de Jesús García Lorca 5 June 1898 – 19 August 1936) Spanish poet, dramatist and theatre director. Murdered, age 38, by the Nationalists for his outspoken liberal views. In spite of censorship during Franco’s dictatorship, Lorca’s work continued to inspire subsequent generations of artists.

ANDRE MALRAUX (3 November 1901 – 23 November 1976) adventurer, author and statesman. During the SCW, Malraux organised the Spanish Republican Airforce. In 1938 he published *L’Espoir*, based on his experiences during the war. Malraux went on to write extensively about the arts, and became France’s first Minister of Cultural Affairs.

PABLO NERUDA (Nefalí Ricardo Reyes Basoalto July 12, 1904 – September 23, 1973) Chilean poet and politician. Neruda lost his diplomatic post in Spain due to his outspoken support of the Republican cause. Later in the war, while based in Paris, he was given the responsibility of evacuating 2000 Spanish refugees to Chile. He called this “the noblest mission I have ever undertaken”. Awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature 1971.

GEORGE ORWELL (Eric Arthur Blair 25 June 1903 – 21 January 1950). British author and journalist. Best remembered for his novels *Animal Farm* and *1984*, his book *Homage to Catalonia* is a record of his time as a volunteer with the Republican forces during the SCW.

LA PASIONARIA (Isidora Dolores Ibárruri Gómez 9 December 1895 – 12 November 1989). ‘The Passion Flower’ was an inspiring Republican leader and Basque politician. Daughter and wife of miners, she coined the phrase: ‘No Pasarán!’ during the battle for Madrid. She is remembered as one of the greatest public orators of the twentieth century.

GERDA TARO (Gerta Pohorylle 1 August 1910 - 26 July 1937). Born to a family of Polish Jews in Germany, Taro became the companion and professional partner of Robert Capa. She is thought by many to be the first female war photographer to be killed on the front line – she died at Brunete, just before her 27th birthday.

VB WIGGLESWORTH (Sir Vincent Brian Wigglesworth FRS 17 April 1899 – 11 February 1994) British professor of entomology at Cambridge University, and Quick Professor of Biology. Knighted 1964. Inspiration for John Updike’s poem ‘VB Nimble, VB Quick’.

LIFE AT A GLANCE

Born: England, 1971
Educated: Durham University, Courtauld Institute of Art, MA Manchester Writing School MMU
Career: International art consultant, travel writer, novelist
Lives: Middle East and England, with husband and two children

SOME FAVORITE BOOKS

James Salter – *Light Years*
Elizabeth Smart – *By Grand Central Station*
Carol Shields – *The Republic of Love*
Barbara Trapido – *Brother of the More Famous Jack*
Paul Bowles – *The Sheltering Sky*
Giuseppi Lampedusa – *The Leopard*
Alain Fournier – *Le Grand Meaulnes*
Françoise Sagan – *Bonjour Tristesse*
Gaston Bachelard – *The Poetics of Space*
Antoine de St Exupery – *The Little Prince*

ON WRITING

How do you write?

I always have a notebook on me, or at a push the back of an envelope, with ideas scribbled on it. There's a lot of research with my books, so this (and writing the final book), happens when my children are at school, or when they are asleep. I write the first draft longhand, then edit on the computer.

Where do you write?

Wherever I can – it's a case of 'hot desking' around the family or in cafés as I don't have a room of my own yet. I read longingly about other writers' sheds! I always write to music - Chopin's Nocturnes have been listened to so much writing they have a Pavlovian effect.

What made you want to be a writer?

Reading great books and wanting to be able to create worlds like those authors.

How do you write a book?

It's never sequential – I start by getting to know everything about my characters and write key scenes first, whatever is bursting to get out of my imagination. Then you put the puzzle together.

What inspires you?

I grew up in a really wild and beautiful part of England, so I still love escaping to the coast or countryside, and travelling.

Want to learn more about Kate Lord Brown?

Visit her online at: www.katelordbrown.com