



# The Secret Daughter of the Tsar

Jennifer Laam

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## READING GROUP GUIDE

### About the book:

A compelling alternate history of the Romanov family in which a secret fifth daughter—smuggled out of Russia before the revolution—continues the royal lineage to dramatic consequences.

In her riveting debut novel, *The Secret Daughter of the Tsar*, Jennifer Laam seamlessly braids together the stories of three women: Veronica, Lena, and Charlotte. Veronica is an aspiring historian living in present-day Los Angeles when she meets a mysterious man who may be heir to the Russian throne. As she sets about investigating the legitimacy of his claim through a winding path of romance and deception, the ghosts of her own past begin to haunt her. Lena, a servant in the imperial Russian court of 1902, is approached by the desperate Empress Alexandra. After conceiving four daughters, the Empress is determined to sire a son and believes Lena can help her. Once elevated to the Romanov's treacherous inner circle, Lena finds herself under the watchful eye of the meddling Dowager Empress Marie. Charlotte, a former ballerina living in World War II occupied Paris, receives a surprise visit from a German officer. Determined to protect her son from the Nazis, Charlotte escapes the city, but not before learning that the officer's interest in her stems from his longstanding obsession with the fate of the Russian monarchy. Then as Veronica's passion intensifies, and her search for the true heir to the throne takes a dangerous turn, the reader learns just how these three vastly different women are connected. *The Secret Daughter of the Tsar* is thrilling from its first intense moments until its final, unexpected conclusion.

### Discussion Questions

1. At several points in the story, Veronica feels drawn to Alexandra Romanov in an almost supernatural sense. Have you ever experienced a similar connection with a historical figure? A distant relative? What connects us to someone in the past?
2. After her failed engagement, Veronica erects self-protective emotional walls. What qualities does Michael possess that break down these walls? What is his main appeal? To what extent is Veronica attracted to the world Michael represents?
3. Veronica's grandmother encourages her to prioritize professional success over romance. Why? Is Abuela's opinion shaped more by Veronica's intellectual talents or by her own experiences?

4. Ultimately, is Michael justified in keeping his secrets from Veronica? Did he truly protect Veronica? Was this an act of self-protection on his part?
5. At the end of the story, Veronica is presented with a potentially life-changing revelation. What do you think she will do next? What would you do in her place?
6. Lena's loyalty to Alexandra implicitly defies the political views of her brother. What did the Romanovs and the monarchy in general represent to someone in Lena's position—security or tyranny? Both?
7. Lena and Alexandra develop a bond that transcends class. Lena and Pavel's attraction transcends the racial order of the time. Are the personal and the political intertwined? Do these relationships suggest Lena has a rebellious side?
8. Lena has a strained and distant relationship with her mother, yet ultimately chooses to follow in her footsteps professionally. Why? Does she admire her mother on some level?
9. After they leave Russia, what would life have been like for Lena and Pavel? What difficulties would they have encountered? How might they have dealt with these difficulties?
10. Charlotte endures the Nazi occupation of Paris seemingly without protest, until there is a clear and present threat to her son.  
  
Is it natural for most people to keep a low profile during military occupation? Without the threat to Laurent, do you think Charlotte would have found ways to rebel against the occupation?
11. Despite their estrangement, Charlotte remains attracted to her husband, Luc. Would she have felt the same way about Luc if they didn't share a common interest in Laurent?
12. Charlotte seems to feel her best days and her happiness lie entirely in the past. Was there more she could have done to embrace the present? Is it possible to find happiness in the present, even if you continue to dwell on the happiness of the past?
13. When Charlotte learns her true identity, she remains more interested in protecting Laurent, and later her granddaughter, than in pursuing her claim. Why? What experiences shape her reaction?
14. The narrative hinges on an alternate historical timeline. Outside of fiction, is there any reason to consider "what might have happened" historical questions?
15. The last Romanovs remain a popular subject of fiction. Why do you think this is? Are we more attracted to their lives, or to the sordid way they died? Is there beauty in tragedy?
16. To some extent, Veronica, Lena, and Charlotte all feel awkward and like outsiders in their respective worlds. In what ways? How do they deal with these feelings? Do their feelings about their relative places in the world evolve over time?

Want to learn more about Jennifer Laam?

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