THE SPY WHO LOVED

by Clare Mulley

A Reading Group Gold Selection

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ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN

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A Conversation with Clare Mulley

"Like most people who got to know Christine, I was soon fascinated by her."

Could you tell us a little bit about your background, and when you decided that you wanted to lead a literary life?

If "leading a literary life" involves owning a walnut writing table and permanently ink-stained fingers then it is something I aspired to romantically as a teenager, but have sadly yet to achieve. I only started writing in my thirties, while on maternity leave from my job as a fundraiser at Save the Children. By then I think I was motivated mainly by sheer nosiness about the extraordinary woman who founded the charity at the end of the First World War. I knew she did not really like individual children (she once referred to them as "little wretches") and I was intrigued by this apparent irony. I also liked the idea of spending some of my maternity leave investigating this least maternal of children's champions, and I thought I might as well knock out an article before my own first child arrived. Seven years, several jobs, and three children later, after a long and hard labor, I delivered my first book: *The Woman Who Saved the Children: A Biography of Eglantyne Jebb, Founder of Save the Children.* Fortunately it won a prize and partly on the back of that I have been writing ever since.

When did you first learn about Christine Granville? What was it about her and her life that inspired you to write a full-length book about her?

Actually I had not heard of Krystyna Skarbek, aka Christine Granville, until my agent suggested that she might make a good next subject. I immediately rejected the idea—I wanted to find my

About the Author

own subject, and this felt rather like a blind date... Like most people who got to know Christine, I was soon fascinated by her. But Christine's story appeals to me for other reasons, too. It provides a remarkable insight into the use and abuse of Poland during the Second World War and, I hope, presents a more balanced view on the effectiveness of female special agents. Women in the resistance have been all too often dismissed as courageous, and perhaps beautiful, but not really quite up to the job. Christine's story certainly puts the record straight.

Can you take readers into the process of writing *The Spy Who Loved*. What challenges did you face in terms of research, for example?

I love researching the truth—or perhaps I should say the many truths—of someone, in the files of public archives, or between the lines of private letters. But researching the life of a special agent contains inherent difficulties. Many of the papers relating to Christine have been destroyed by accident or on purpose, and in any case agents were trained not to leave a paper trail. When I started my research there were only three known letters written by Christine. I was lucky enough to find many more in various private collections, but even then the stories often didn't add up with what I knew to be the facts. It turned out that Christine loved to spin a good yarn, but even tall stories can hold important moral or emotional truths.…

In an attempt to try to distinguish fact from fiction, emotion from deliberate disinformation, I decided to visit the places Christine had known, doing what Antonia Fraser calls optical research.

"Each generation should revisit the stories from the past."

In Poland, I found Christine's baptism certificate in a small parish archive. I visited her childhood home, and talked to people she had known, or whose parents had known her. In Warsaw I stayed in a beautiful apartment in the reconstructed old city, belonging to the son of one of Christine's lovers. Walking out the door one morning I was abruptly challenged by a Wehrmacht officer in full uniform, toting a gun towards me. It was absolutely terrifying. It turned out that I had accidentally walked into the filming of a Polish World War II TV drama! But even this taught me something: I knew there must be some rational explanation for this apparent time warp, and yet I found myself frozen to the spot, almost unable to speak. Christine, a British special agent who was herself part-Jewish, was arrested behind Nazi lines several times during the war but always kept her cool, remembered her cover story, and talked herself and sometimes her colleagues out of danger. What extraordinary blunt courage she had!

Do you feel you know Christine now, having told her story?

I do feel I have a good measure of this courageous, passionate, and rather difficult woman but I would not claim to have nailed her completely. I don't really believe in "definitive" biographies. Each generation should revisit the stories from the past—biography is famously as much a mirror as a window onto history—and everyone is open to multiple interpretations anyhow. But that aside, Christine was passionate above all about her freedom. I respect that, and would not want to diminish her by claiming to know every secret. Having said all of which, love her or loathe her, Christine

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always provoked a strong response. Someone like this can't help but leave a powerful impression behind them so, yes, I feel I know what made her tick.

Are you currently working on another book? And if so, what—or who—is your subject?

Christine was always a hard act to follow, and it's no different for her biographer. However, I am delighted to have found an absolutely fascinating new subject—two extraordinary women whose intertwined stories provide another remarkable insight into the war. I am completely absorbed in it.

About the Author

A Selection of Photographs

Christine in Syria, 1942.
Source of photo still unknown

Unlabeled Trzepnica photo. Could this be Christine's father, Count Jerzy Skarbek, on his prize stallion, Satan?
Beczkowice Parish Archive, Poland

Behind the Book

Dennis Muldowney in police custody, 1952.
From the Picture Post *July 7, 1952*

Christine's cousins, Jan and Andrzej Skarbek, with friends.
Courtesy of Countess Maryś Skarbek, London

Christine in Budapest, 1940.
Courtesy of Christine Isabelle Cole/Bill Stanley Moss private papers, Britain (intended for the Polish Institute and Sikorski Museum)

Mulley lays red and white flowers, the colors of Poland, on Christine's grave at a service of thanksgiving. Kensal Green Roman Catholic Cemetery, May 10, 2013.

Courtesy of the Republic of Poland.

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Behind the Book

Wladimir Ledóchowski, 1942.
Courtesy of Jan Ledóchowski

Recommended Reading

Nonfiction

***Undercover* by Patrick Howarth**
***Hide and Seek* by Xan Fielding**
Evocative SOE war memoirs from two men who trained and served alongside Christine. Howarth was inspired to write poetry about her, and Fielding, whose life Christine saved, dedicated his book "to the memory of Christine Granville."

***Rising '44* by Norman Davies**
Davies's masterful and deeply compassionate account of the uprising of the people of Warsaw against their Nazi occupiers. I imagine Christine, then stuck in Italy, weeping over the radio reports, and cursing to hell that she could not join the battle and fight directly for the freedom of her homeland.

***A Life in Secrets: The Story of Vera Atkins and the Lost Agents of SOE* by Sarah Helm**
Fascinating account of the secret life of SOE French Section coordinator Vera Atkins, and her courageous postwar investigation into the fate of the British female agents who went missing in action. Vera described Christine as "very brave, very attractive, but a loner and a law unto herself."

***Between Silk and Cyanide* by Leo Marks**
The brilliant memoirs of Britain's leading cryptographer who learned coding at his father's bookshop, the famed 84 Charing Cross Road, and spent his war with SOE where he trained Violette Szabo among so many other brave agents. Irreverent, funny, poignant—this is one of my favorite war memoirs. I wish I'd met him.

Keep on Reading

***She Landed by Moonlight* by Carole Seymour-Jones**
A new biography of Pearl Witherington, one of the greatest female agents who, when given civilian rather than military honors because she was a woman, scorned that "there was nothing civil about what I did." There are many other biographies of courageous female agents worth reading by Susan Ottaway, Shrabani Basu, and others.

Novels

***A Place to Stand* by Ann Bridge**
Written with her daughter, Kate O'Malley, this wonderfully evocative novel is loosely based on Kate, Christine, and Andrzej's time together in Budapest in 1940.

***Trapeze* by Simon Mawer**
A well-researched tale of a British female agent dropped into Nazi-occupied France, slightly less romanticized than Sebastian Faulks's *Charlotte Gray*.

***The Spies of Warsaw* by Alan Furst**
A compelling thriller set in Poland in 1937. Could the beautiful and courageous Anna Szarbek have been partially inspired by Krystyna Skarbek, as Christine was known in Warsaw at that time?

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Reading Group Questions

1. First, a show of hands: Who among you ever heard of Christine Granville before reading this book?

2. What did you know about female SOE agents—either from your own studies or interests, or as portrayed in popular film/television adaptations—before reading *The Spy Who Loved*? How, if at all, did this book teach you about, or change your impression of, this particular wartime practice?

3. What literary techniques did Clare Mulley use to tell her story? Do you feel you know Christine now that you've read about her? What do you wish you could know about her beyond the world of the book?

4. The author wrote that Christine "lived boundlessly, as generous as she could be cruel." What do you think were Christine's greatest strengths, and what were her weaknesses?

5. What do you think Christine would have done with her life if the second World War had not taken place? What do you think she would have gone on to do with the rest of her life, were it not for her untimely death?

6. Take a moment to talk about other well-known books—biographies or novels—set during the Second World War. What are some of your favorites books, and why? Who are some of the most memorable characters—real or fictional?

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7. Why *do* modern readers enjoy books about a particular period in history? How can Christine's story inform us about the world we live in today?

8. We are taught, as young readers, that every story has a "moral." Is there a moral to *The Spy Who Loved*? What can we learn about our lives—and ourselves—from Christine's story?

Keep on Reading

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