

WIDOWLAND

BY C. J. CAREY

READING GROUP GUIDE



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Early on in the story, it's stated that the Leader once said, "Women are the most important citizens in this land." Discuss the irony of this statement that becomes evident as the story unfolds.
2. Rose's job was to "correct" literature that was degenerate, subversive, or didn't align with the Protectorate's values and teachings. What purpose did this serve for the Protectorate, and what does this say about the power of books and story?
3. What regulations imposed upon women—particularly in the lower castes—by the regime did you find most egregious? Now think about your current situation: What regulations would you be at risk of breaking in such a society?
4. Why do you think there was such a monumental celebration for the coronation of Edward VIII and Queen Wallis when it was largely ceremonial and they had no legitimate power over the UK?
5. Rose's six-year-old niece is part of a generation with no prior knowledge of life before the Alliance, while Rose's father remembers it clearly. Discuss the generational impact of important historical events and how our perceptions of history change over time, depending on whether we lived through an event or merely read about it in history books.
6. Rose appears to have conflicting feelings about Martin Kreuz. She is attracted to him "despite herself." Why do you think this is? Do you think she had genuine feelings for him? Or did she enter a relationship with him out of obligation because of his position and influence?
7. Citizens of the Alliance were encouraged not to think sentimentally about the past, and any suggestion that the past was better than the future was strictly outlawed as a "nostalgia crime." The idea that a government could control people's thoughts seems outlandish, but imagine a world where that could happen. Under these laws, would you ever be guilty of a nostalgia crime?

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8. Oliver tells Rose, “No good society can exist without mutual trust.” Do you agree with this statement? Discuss the ways in which the theme of trust plays out in the book.
9. Why do you think Helena agrees to give up her baby and that that’s the only choice she has?
10. Rose mostly seems to fall in line and play by the rules and regulations set forth by the regime. But her beliefs are quickly challenged upon meeting with the Friedas in Widowland. Why do you think they had such an influence on her? In what ways did they instill courage in her to take a stance?
11. When do you think is the moment Rose turned into a resistor? When she neglected to turn over her report on the Friedas to the minister? When she agreed to help Oliver break into Martin’s office to procure the agenda for the convention? When she gave the vial to one of the Friedas? Or had she always been one?
12. With travel to the mainland banned, international news censored, and most foreign mail forbidden, citizens of the UK were effectively shut off from the rest of the world. Imagine you lived in this kind of society. How do you think you would fare (or not)?
13. Throughout the story, it was evident that not everyone supported the Alliance and the regime’s governing style. This is also true in our modern world. Why do you think some people become resisters, who speak up and take action in the face of oppression, while others follow along blindly?
14. While this version of history did not come to fruition, women and people of other marginalized groups are still sometimes reduced to their reproductive status, heritage, or racial characteristics. Why do you think this happens, and what are the repercussions for our modern-day society?
15. The idea of a government or a country attempting to erase or rewrite certain parts of history is not unheard of. In what ways has this happened in real life?

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A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

What inspired you to write *Widowland*?

Most novels marinate for a long time before they emerge, but *Widowland* sprang into my mind after a single encounter. My husband had recently died at the relatively young age of sixty-two, and I went out to lunch with a friend I had known for decades. After commiserating with me, he said, “You know, we’d love to invite you to dinner at our house. But we only really entertain couples.” I was genuinely shocked at this response, as though becoming a widow had changed the entire essence of me overnight. Walking home, the thought went through my head, *I’m living in Widowland now*. Then, almost immediately, it occurred to me how interesting it would be if Widowland were a real place, rather than just a metaphor. What if a place existed where older women, already marginalized by society, were banished?



The idea linked up with some research I’d done about the treatment of older German women in WWII. Widows without children were given the nickname “Friedhöfsfrauen.” Cemetery Women. They were allocated the meanest rations, because they were useless to society. I started thinking what these Widowlands would be like. Probably they would be run-down, decrepit places on the edges of towns where nobody else wanted to live. But put together a group of older women, and what else would you get? Only the most literate people in society. Widowland would be full of women who loved to talk about books.

Many of the figures who appear throughout the novel actually existed, and certain plot points were based on plans drawn up by the Germans during WWII. Can you share with us the research you did for this book?

I’ve written several novels under the name Jane Thynne, based around women in prewar and wartime Germany, with a particular focus on the way the regime dictated their daily lives. Far from ignoring women, the Third Reich placed huge importance on controlling them. They had Bride Schools and Mother Service and Faith and Beauty training schools for women marrying into the SS. Like many totalitarian regimes, the Nazis wanted to limit every kind of independence or individuality for women. Effectively, therefore, I have been researching *Widowland* for more than a decade! My study of WWII also introduced me to the eccentric ideas of Hitler’s philosopher guru,

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Alfred Rosenberg, who passionately longed for the job of Protector of England should Britain and Germany form an Alliance, and in *Widowland*, that has come about. The Nazis had very detailed plans for running the UK after an invasion, formulated by Walter Schellenberg, and helpfully these ideas were compiled in a book that is available today

Even though the book is clearly based on the Nazis in Germany, you never once refer to them as Nazis or mention Hitler. What was your reasoning for this?

Although other Third Reich officials are named, I deliberately avoided using the words “Hitler” or “Nazi,” because I wanted to convey the generic nature of an oppressive regime. In terms of twentieth-century history, it happened to be the Nazis who posed an invasive threat to Britain, but the techniques of authoritarian rule are similar throughout the world. Sowing division, turning citizens against each other, controlling the media, and restricting what people read are the skill sets of dictators everywhere.

Do you think anything like this could happen in today's world? Or have we properly learned from the past?

Unfortunately, most aspects of *Widowland* are drawn from modern life. Anyone wanting evidence that the segregation and degradation of women are a reality in many parts of the world need only look at Afghanistan, where women are once again donning the burqa, or Iran, or the rise in Nigeria of the Boko Haram movement, whose name means “Western education is forbidden.” Just as dramatically, the censoring of books over problematic ideas, the concept of transgressive literature, and the questioning of historical fact are alarmingly on the rise across the Western world.

What is the process you go through from the first idea for a character to bringing them to life on the page?

Often in novels, characters undergo a process of growth, where they come to discover more about themselves during the story. The joy of writing Rose Ransom was to imagine someone encountering the great classics of English literature for the first time and finding them in conflict with everything she has been trained to believe. That required not only Rose but the reader to see the familiar afresh, which is what novels are intended to do. Sometimes, though, characters simply spring into life fully formed, which was the case with Celia's husband, Geoffrey. Everyone knows a Geoffrey: maybe the controlling, humorless husband of a friend who doesn't deserve her. There are always people in society, like Geoffrey, who will quickly and unquestioningly ally themselves with those in power.

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What was your path to becoming a writer? Did you always know you wanted to write novels?

I wanted to be a writer from the age of fifteen, when I would produce stories about our teachers at school and circulate them among my friends. After university, therefore, I went into journalism. Journalism is a wonderful apprenticeship for novelists. Both jobs require an interest in other people and a love of writing. Journalism meant flexing my writing muscles every day and, just as importantly, delving into the worlds of the media, politics, and social affairs that so fascinated me. It was great fun. I could hardly believe I was being paid for it. I worked on national newspapers at a golden period for journalism in the 1990s, interviewing and reporting on politicians, historians, and celebrities. But all during that time, ideas for novels were running through my head.

What is your writing process like in terms of your routine (i.e., when and where you write)? Do you develop an outline for a book first, or do you let the story take you where it needs to go?

For me, it's vital to develop an outline first and to plot the novel out, always knowing that other ideas will arise organically. I also try to keep to a strict routine and work office hours, but the pandemic has been a distracting and disruptive experience, even for those of us who weren't badly affected. A more trivial distraction has been the racket of the green parakeets that have colonized the trees directly outside my study window in Wimbledon. Parakeets only recently arrived in southeast England, and their raucous screeches are quite a contrast to the traditional hoot of the wood pigeons. Meanwhile, as I write, my dog, Marnie, maintains a steady stare, trying to hypnotize me into giving her a biscuit.

What are some of the books you've read that have influenced your writing?

A key inspiration for *Widowland's* atmosphere of paranoia, surveillance, and lack of freedom was the communist dictatorship of East Berlin, under the Stasi. *Stasiland* by Anna Funder describes her time there shortly after the fall of the wall as a "horror-romance" of not only Orwellian gloom but also black humor, such as when she tracks down ex-Stasi officers through classified newspaper advertisements. It's the banality and the thoroughness of a police state that stand out. Every school, factory, apartment block, and pub contained an informer. I've always been interested in how being spied on affects behavior, and Funder is excellent with the way people got used to communicating obliquely, learned what not to discuss, and how to spot shadows.

The Past Is Myself by Christabel Bielenberg, an English woman married to a German lawyer, was the first eyewitness view I read of the growth of Nazism, and its impact has never left me.

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Bielenberg's account of the gradual growth of fascism, and the way the populace became accustomed to it, is unforgettable. Her stories highlight the madness of Nazi bureaucracy, their obsession with controlling and ordering, and how people cultivated the detachment necessary to see human beings as objects.

Like so many writers, I owe a huge debt to *Jane Eyre*, the most famous novel about female empowerment. Its theme of a poor woman marrying a rich man with a secret has been rewritten time and again, most notably in *Rebecca*. I first read it as a teenager, and that raw, passionate romance never leaves you. The central idea—that an impoverished, powerless woman should, despite the restrictions of her day, assert herself, was one I adopted for my widows. Other themes—of men with secrets, the horror of madness, and the utter impotence of poverty—were also inspiring. The central story of *Jane Eyre* is not the love story between Jane and Mr. Rochester but the way that Jane falls in love with herself and comes to see her own value. Her self-confidence develops throughout the novel. That is what I wanted for my protagonist, Rose, so I threaded *Jane Eyre* into the narrative, both as a subject and as the text that educates her.

Do books have a designated place in your home? What's on your TBR (to-be-read) pile these days?

Like most writers, books are my home. Teetering stacks of novels sit everywhere. They live in every room, and I live in them. I'm currently writing the sequel to *Widowland*, so I'm delving into biographies of Wallis Simpson and Albert Speer. In an attempt to escape the news cycle, I'm also losing myself in the complete works of John Le Carré, whose books capture so brilliantly the atmosphere of weary, end-of-empire England I wanted for *Widowland*. I'm also loving the novels of Dorothy Whipple, an English novelist who wrote about the lives of middle-class women in the 1930s–'50s. My favorite, *They Were Sisters*, traces how the marriages of three sisters determine the course of their lives. The idea of being trapped, at a time when divorce was almost unthinkable, is a recurrent theme in her novels. They may be set in the sedate English Home Counties, but the level of psychological observation, watchfulness, and simmering tension would sit perfectly well in a spy novel.

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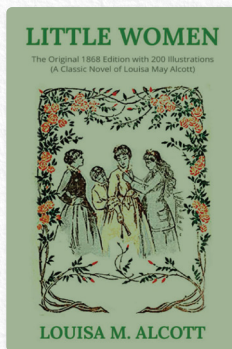
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BOOKS ROSE RANSOM IS ASKED TO EDIT IN *WIDOWLAND*

How many have you read?

Why do you think these were marked for revisions by the Nazi regime in *Widowland*?

Little Women
by Louisa May Alcott

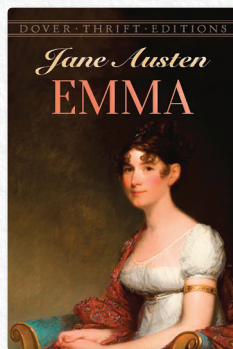


"Her recent correction of *Little Women* had been unusually lenient. She had loved the character of Jo March, the novel's ambitious, precocious, complicated rebel, and had been reluctant to strike out some of Jo's attempts to rise above her gender and class, not to mention her heartfelt rejection of an appropriate suitor in favor of personal gratification.

I'm happy as I am, and love my liberty too well to be in a hurry to give it up for any mortal man.

Rose decided to leave the sentence in."

Emma
by Jane Austen



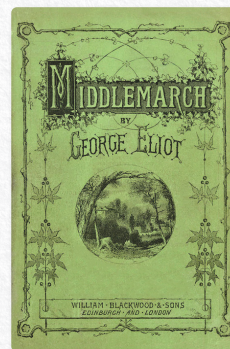
"The message was that women like Harriet Smith should not dream of marriage beyond their caste. Yet the way Jane Austen had written it, the effect of the lesson was nuanced. Harriet gained self-confidence through her mistaken romance. She came to understand that a high social class did not necessarily imply a finer character."

Jane Eyre
by Charlotte Brontë



"The text was problematic in all kinds of ways. The love story concerned a lower-born woman who fell in love with a rich man from the higher orders and aspired to marry him. Yet when she finally won his affections, she left him. The narrative was riddled with assertions of female self-sufficiency. Empowerment, independence, self-awareness. Practically every page required an edit."

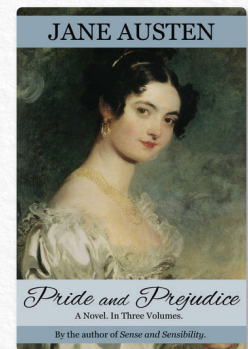
Middlemarch
by George Eliot



"Without doubt, it was Rose's status as star of the team that meant the correcting of George Eliot's masterpiece had fallen to her. She had only just begun the work, and already she knew she had never faced a challenge like it..."

As with many of the novels she read now, Rose began to see her own life refracted through its pages. In Dorothea, who sought to devote her life to a cause and a passion, who yearned for a life beyond the strictures of femininity, who thrilled to the idea of opening books and hearing voices she had never expected, Rose saw herself."

Pride and Prejudice
by Jane Austen



"It's a comedy of manners, I think. We did it at school"

'Precisely. But it's not until you reach adulthood that you appreciate what Miss Austen has to say. She's saying that Elizabeth Bennet is intelligent, yes? That marriage can subject women to degradation.

That masculine superiority should be questioned."