



"A delightfully spunky heroine  
defies convention in this  
engaging historical mystery."

—RHYS BOWEN, *New York Times*  
bestselling author

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# FRONT PAGE AFFAIR

A  
KITTY WEEKS  
MYSTERY

RADHA VATSAL

## READING GROUP GUIDE

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1. Do you think Kitty is the kind of person who fits in wherever she is? Why or why not? What is it about her that allows her to fit in (or not)?
2. In what ways does Kitty's financial status enable her to move about society?
3. How does Kitty's father's background influence his behavior and affect his and Kitty's relationship? How does their relationship influence how Kitty investigates?
4. What drives Kitty's friendship with Amanda Vanderwell? What do you think Kitty gets out of her relationship with Amanda, and vice versa?
5. What are the characteristics of some of the powerful, independent women we meet and hear about in the novel? Think of Mrs. Basshor, Anne Morgan, Miss Busby, Mary Pickford, and Pearl White. How are they similar? How are they different?

6. Why do you think Miss Busby suffered a nervous breakdown? How might this be related to her hopes, expectations, and possible disappointment in Kitty?
7. How does Jeannie Williams feel about Kitty?
8. Do you think Aimee Cole genuinely likes Kitty, or does she try to turn her into a sympathetic ally for her own purposes?
9. Do you find the revelation about Hotchkiss's sexuality surprising? Do you think his contemporaries would have made similar assumptions about him as modern readers might?
10. Do you see Soames as a viable romantic interest for Kitty? What about him makes him a good match for her? What aspects of his life and career might prove problematic for a future relationship between them?
11. In her films, Pearl White plays an active heroine who never gives up but often has to be rescued from perilous situations. Are you surprised that those types of heroines existed a hundred years ago? How are they different (and similar) to action heroines today?
12. Jeannie, Kitty, and Amanda inhabit different but overlapping worlds. If you could live in one of their shoes for a day, which one would you chose, and why?

13. How did Dr. Albert's plan to infect the horses meet or defy your expectations of German warfare, especially compared to the torpedoing of the *Lusitania*?
14. In what ways does Kitty's world seem not dissimilar to our own? In what ways does it seem old-fashioned?

## A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

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### **What was your inspiration for *A Front Page Affair*?**

There are too many to name here, but in terms of books, I'd say E. L. Doctorow's *The Waterworks* and Alexander McCall Smith's No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency series. I wanted to write a novel that was entertaining and very readable, yet transported readers to a different time and place.

I also wanted to create a memorable heroine—one who was determined and tenacious, but also naive about the world around her—and watch her develop as her eyes are opened to complexities of the time in which she lives.

### **What drew you to the 1910s as the setting for the story?**

I first became interested in the 1910s when I was a graduate student at Duke University researching early women filmmakers. It came as a shock to me that so many women were directing, producing, and writing films at that time. I was also amazed to learn about action-film heroines like Pearl White, who were the stars of highly popular action/adventure/mystery series. I soon discovered that this phenomenon wasn't just limited to film: women held prominent positions in many professional fields during the 1910s and then—remarkably—starting in the 1920s, their numbers began to decline and

didn't go back up again until the second wave of feminism in 1970s.

But the 1910s weren't just an exciting time for women; they were an incredibly exciting time for the country. This was the period when the United States stepped out from the shadows and moved from being a regional power to taking its place on the world stage. It was a time when much that we take for granted today—things like car culture, movies, telephones, nation states (instead of kingdoms and empires)—was taking its modern form. And the transition wasn't an easy one.

I thought it would be exciting to combine the coming-of-age story for the country with the coming-of-age story for women and to tell it through the perspective of an unlikely protagonist: a young, well-off, pretty journalist who enjoys a privileged lifestyle.

### **How did you do your research?**

I like to use primary sources, and when I started doing my research, a lot of materials hadn't been digitized, so I had to go to the New York Public Library, which fortunately has an amazing reference collection. I spent a lot of time looking at books published during the early 1910s—decorating guides and exercise manuals, for example. I also studied floor plans of different apartment buildings and the amenities they offered to pin down where Kitty would live and what type of home she has, and so on.

When historical characters speak in the novel, I like to remain as close as possible to their own words. So, I try to read books or articles written by them or about them from the



1910s. I go to secondary sources to get a general overview, but as far as specifics are concerned, I much prefer to go back to original material because that's where you find little unexpected bits of information that add something special to a character.

I also decided that each book in the series would be set at a specific moment in time. I had read about the Morgan shooting and the whole business with Dr. Albert, which culminated in his losing his briefcase. I then went back to the *New York Times* and read each day's paper in the days leading up to the shooting, through the period of my story, and right up to the date when Dr. Albert lost his briefcase and a bit after. Since these little-known historical events are entwined in the plot of the mystery and aren't just a backdrop to it, I wanted to give the experience of living that history.

### **What do you find to be most challenging about writing a historical novel?**

What's most challenging about writing a historical novel is also what makes it so enjoyable: finding the right balance between fact and fiction. I enjoy keeping dates, places, and people accurate and not altering facts to suit the convenience of the story. If Kitty lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and she has to drive her father to a meeting downtown, it will take her a while to get there. If J. P. Morgan was shot on the third of July and the news appeared in the paper on the fourth, then that's not going to change.

The trick is to maintain a good balance and to digest all the facts and then forget about them and allow them to flow

naturally through the story. I keep a 1915 calendar beside me as I write in which I track factual events and fictional events.

**What is the most surprising thing you found in the course of writing and researching the book?**

How far-fetched, almost implausible, many historical events seem from our present vantage point—Dr. Albert forgetting his briefcase on the subway; J. P. Morgan falling on top of the man who tried to shoot him, trapping the fellow beneath him. Accidents, sometimes absurd accidents, can have serious consequences. I like to find these seemingly trivial moments and try to understand their significance.

**Real-life people, such as Anne Morgan, Nellie Bly, and Pearl White, as well as locations, such as the Colony Club and the Sleepy Hollow Country Club, appear in the book. How are/were they significant to their time? How have they changed since?**

Anne Morgan, Nellie Bly, and Pearl White were all very different women. One was a philanthropist; another, a journalist; the third, an actress. But all three were very well-known in their day and provided different examples of what it meant to be a successful woman.

The Colony Club and Sleepy Hollow Country Club were both exclusive clubs, and both still exist today. I like to use real locations as much as possible because I think it creates a real geography and allows readers an opportunity to feel like they live in the world of the novel, which is something I enjoy when I read. I'm a sucker for maps in books and that type of detail.



**How did you come up with the name *Capability Weeks*?**

I wanted to find a name that would evoke something about the heroine's character—or the kind of person she aspires to be—and a name that could also be shortened into a milder-sounding diminutive. Names like Hope, Virtue, Patience, etc., seemed too soft. I don't recall exactly when I first heard about Lancelot "Capability" Brown, the famous landscape designer, but I loved that name because it sounds so competent. And I love the contrast between it and "Kitty," which sounds stereotypically feminine.

**Which character do you feel most closely connected to?**

All of them, really. I see the world through Kitty's eyes, but I can't help but sympathize with Miss Busby's frustration with her or enjoy her father's secretiveness and his desire to needle her a bit. I like the way Amanda condescends to her and Jeannie manages to "steal" her position. The fun thing about Kitty is that she isn't perfect, nor is she always smarter than the other characters. She's just willing to go the distance.

**Writing is not your first career. How did you come to it?**

At the back of my mind, I always wanted to write fiction. It was a way I could explore ideas that are interesting to me and bring together different strands that otherwise might not coexist. Fiction allows me much more freedom than academic writing, but I wouldn't have the subject matter that I do without my academic training. I chose mystery as a genre because I love to read it. It has a beginning, middle, and end—and it's all about discovery. That's something I really enjoy—if a

book can open my eyes to something new, for me, that's a huge bonus.

**How does your background, both in film and as a woman who came from India as a teenager to study in the United States, shape the book you've written?**

Without studying silent cinema, I doubt I would have discovered the 1910s as this fascinating and rewarding period in which to set a mystery. I also discovered the wonderful action-heroines and the actresses who played them, who were the inspiration for a character like Kitty.

Coming from India to attend boarding school in Connecticut on a scholarship as a teenager was a pivotal moment in my life. I was old enough to be able to look critically at the world I was entering, but also young enough to assimilate very quickly. I remember a friend telling me, "I keep forgetting you're not American." I used to keep forgetting that I wasn't American too! But it's this divided identity that gives Kitty her unique viewpoint—she can be in a certain milieu and seem like she's part of it, but she also has the perspective of an outsider looking in. This doesn't exempt her from the consequences of her actions, of course, but it does make her an effective, although unlikely, detective.

Funnily enough, I think my childhood in Mumbai helps me to imagine New York in the 1910s. I grew up among a very colorful cast of characters from all walks of life. And my family was, and is, filled with strong, outspoken women. My grandmother ran a large, rambling house in the style of a bygone era. Watching her converse with the tradesmen—everyone from

the upholsterer to the fruit seller to the man who fixed broken necklaces—and hearing them talk about their families and lives gave me some insight, I think, into a more personal time. A time when you knew the person who brought your milk and sewed your clothes—although, by the 1910s in New York, that was slowly changing.

She also belonged to a country club where “everybody knew everybody.” I think that’s the way New York was in the 1910s (and perhaps still is now). If you were a part of a certain milieu, you knew everyone you had to know or, at worst, were just a step away from knowing everyone.

### **Who are some of your favorite authors?**

The authors I turn to time and again are Agatha Christie and Dick Francis in mystery. Authors who create immersive worlds like Frank Herbert in *Dune* or Tolkien in the Lord of the Rings trilogy. I think I must know Jane Austen by heart. I love Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Charles Dickens. When I was in my teens, I read everything from Isaac Asimov to *Gone with the Wind*.

### **What advice would you give to aspiring writers?**

There’s no magic to it. You have to start writing and then finish. For me, finishing and letting go is the hardest part. I never feel like I’m done, but when I start spinning in circles, I realize I must be done. I wish I had the ability to look at something I’ve written and feel content with it, but I’m not that lucky.