

"A remarkable story of a remarkable woman."

—SUSAN MEISSNER,

bestselling author of *The Last Year of the War*

LADY CLEMENTINE



a novel

MARIE BENEDICT

New York Times Bestselling Author of
THE ONLY WOMAN IN THE ROOM

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Winston Churchill is one of the most recognizable figures of modern history. What did you know about his personal life before you read *Lady Clementine*? Did you have any understanding of his wife and children in particular, and did the book challenge any preconceived ideas about his private life?
2. While Clementine's ancestral background was aristocratic, she grew up in relatively reduced financial circumstances, carrying the additional burdens of a peripatetic childhood and the uncertainty of her paternity. How did her unusual upbringing affect her behavior and opinions? How, in turn, did her belief system and background affect Winston, if at all?
3. *Lady Clementine* opens with Clementine describing herself as being "set apart" from the rest of society. How did this feeling manifest throughout the novel, and did it change throughout her life? How did this sense of otherness impact her relationship with Winston?
4. Throughout the course of the book, Clementine is transformed from a bright but hesitant and sometimes self-doubting young bride into the formidable wife of the prime minister, with a power base of her own and an impressive list of initiatives. Did Clementine's metamorphosis surprise you, particularly given the historical limitations of women in the political realm? How did

Clementine's relationship with Winston both further her growth and hinder it? What sacrifices did she have to make in order to become such an influential political wife?

5. While motherhood was different in the time period of the novel and the class in which the Churchills operated, Clementine struggled with it. How would you characterize Clementine as a mother? Did she evolve as a parent over the years? Do you feel that she crossed the line of acceptability, even in the context of her time? How did her relationship with Winston impact her mothering? Compare and contrast modern motherhood with historical motherhood from this time, keeping in mind variations in class.
6. What drew Winston and Clementine together, and how did that change over the decades? How did Winston's political alliances impact their interactions? What goal united them when their political views weren't precisely aligned?
7. After she spends time with Eleanor Roosevelt, Clementine comes to a shocking realization about Winston's view of her identity, or at least the way he presents her identity to the Roosevelts. What is the importance of female relationships in Clementine's story and in the stories of other strong women?
8. Which, if any, of the characters in *Lady Clementine* do you find yourself relating to the most? Did you connect with Clementine?
9. What is the most surprising thing you learned about Clementine? Did it relate to her parenting? Her marriage to Winston? Her relationship with Terence Philip on the *Rosaura*? The amount of time away from her family?

10. Discuss the ways in which Clementine's life encompassed issues that were not only historic but modern as well.

11. Winston Churchill left an enormous mark on history, and he is credited with saving Britain during World War II—but you now know that Clementine was a deeply influential figure in Winston's professional and personal life behind the scenes. Do you think he would've been as successful if he didn't have Clementine supporting him? How would you characterize her legacy?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

While her husband is an enormously famous figure, Clementine Churchill is often relegated to the margins of history. How did you first hear of her, and what about her made you want to lend her story a voice?

During my time researching and writing books that—I hope—excavate important historical women from the shadows of the past and bring them out into the light of modern day, I feel as though I've developed an antenna for these women. As I was researching the onset of World War II for my novel *The Only Woman in the Room*, Winston Churchill, of course, figured prominently, and I couldn't help but wonder about his family, his wife in particular. While I do not profess to be a Winston Churchill expert, I did find it peculiar that I knew nothing about the spouse of one of the most recognizable men in history. Who was she? What was she like? Where was she during all these world-changing events? So I went down the rabbit hole, as I often do when I'm intrigued, and I learned that Clementine Churchill was not only the quintessential woman behind the man, but also standing beside him—and often in front of him—helping him lead through some of the most critical moments in modern history. I knew hers was a story that deserved to be told.

***Lady Clementine* relies on a great deal of research, from the minutiae of British politics to the personal lives of historical figures. What did your research process look like for this book?**

In some ways, my research for all my novels is quite similar. I begin by assembling and delving into any original source material that I can

locate about the woman I'm writing about, filling in informational blanks with secondary source materials. Once I've finished amassing that data and created a timeline and broad outline, I'll cast my net wide, researching relevant details about the character's time period—from macro information such as political and military issues, cultural developments, and socioeconomic circumstances, to micro details such as attire, popular foods, and home decor. Unique aspects arise for each woman, of course, and I often find myself homing in on particular pieces of research. In Clementine's case, it was a collection of letters between Clementine and Winston spanning the course of their relationship (which encompassed much of their lives) assembled by their daughter Mary. Not only did these letters provide singular insight into Clementine's voice, but they also gave me an extraordinary look into the feelings they shared with each other, the way they spoke to each other and the topics about which they communicated.

This book is a piece of historical fiction, which of course means that while it's based heavily on historical figures and events, it necessitates a bit of artistic license. Were there any specific moments or characters that forced you to rely more on fiction than fact?

I approached this novel as I did my other historical fiction: I look at the research on the macro and micro aspects of my character's world as the architecture of my story—the foundation, the pillars, the roof. But in between the pillars and in the space between the foundation and the roof, there will always be gaps, unknowns from the research. And it is in those gaps that the fiction comes in to tell the story, using—I hope—a blend of the logic I developed over my decade as a lawyer, as well as my familiarity with the characters, time, and setting I've attained from the research. As just one example of this, on the night before D-Day, we know that Clementine spent part of that evening with Winston. But we do not know the precise conversations they shared or the comfort and advice she might have offered him, and we cannot know the exact

impact those exchanges might have had on his decision-making and leadership on the critical day. Therein lies the fiction.

Like any relationship, Clementine and Winston's marriage changes with time. Theirs is especially strained, however, because of their growing political differences. Given this emotional complexity, was it difficult to write the evolution of their relationship?

Clementine and Winston had a particularly complex relationship because their bond not only filled emotional voids left in each other by their difficult upbringings, but it also fed their shared passion for politics and its underlying goals. In some ways, these two aspects of their relationship were intertwined. So when Winston's politics began to deviate from Clementine's, their relationship became difficult in some respects, and I had to really dig in to her psyche to envision how this would have affected her, given her feelings for her husband and their ongoing projects, as well as her somewhat fragile nerves. I imagined that, in order to carry them through challenging times, she focused upon those values that united them—the betterment of the lives of the English people and their safety in wartime—instead of the issues that divided them.

Clementine's inner conflict between her role as a mother and her career is something that can resonate with many contemporary women. Were you inspired by personal experience when you delved into this issue?

As a mother myself, I found researching and writing about Clementine's role as a mother particularly intriguing and eye-opening. I learned a tremendous amount not only about her very specific parenting experiences, but also about the mothering standards for women of her class in that era, which were quite different and much more hands-off than our own, and it made me reconsider various modern-day practices. This understanding provided a lens through which I

could view Clementine's parenting decisions more fairly, because they were oftentimes very dissimilar to the choices mothers would likely make today. But no matter the distinctions between parenting practices of her day and ours, I believe Clementine's struggles over making the correct choices for her children—and living with the ramifications of poor selections—is something to which all mothers can relate, particularly those who juggle career demands as well.

As a writer of historical fiction, a large part of your job consists of creating deep inner lives for characters based on real people. Have you ever worried about misrepresenting someone or writing them inaccurately?

I always worry about my representation of the historical women about whom I write. I feel incredibly honored and privileged to tell their stories, along with a tremendous responsibility toward them. I try to keep that sense of responsibility at the forefront of my mind as I write my fictional interpretation of a piece of their histories—always reminding myself that it is indeed fiction that I write.

Clementine was a deeply influential figure in Winston's professional and personal life. Do you think he would have been as successful if he hadn't had Clementine supporting him?

While no one can know for certain what Winston's legacy would have been without Clementine, I believe she was integral to his success. Historians can debate the impact her insights, intellect, and advice may have had on his political decision-making and leadership—particularly since the research isn't as robust as I might like in that arena—but there can be no doubt that she supported him enormously from an emotional perspective. That role alone was very likely critical to Winston's well-being, which ensured that he could fulfill the necessary leadership position in World War II. That said, I personally believe her professional and political impact was wide-ranging and key.