

"A tense, gripping read, sure to
enthrall readers everywhere."

—KATE QUINN

a novel

QUEEN WALLIS

C. J. CAREY

author of *Widowland*

Reading Group Guide

1. From the unrest in Eastern Europe to book banning to governing women's bodies and women's rights, there are many parallels between this fictional historic world in *Queen Wallis* and today's real world. Do you believe that history repeats itself?
2. Rose's job is to edit and redact the classics of English literature, removing subversive portrayals of women and any suggestion of female self-assertion and -empowerment. Similarly, there have been recent efforts to ban books with content deemed "inappropriate" from libraries, schools, and bookstores. Describe how the efforts of today are similar to what happens in *Queen Wallis*. How are they different?
3. Of all the constraints and restrictions put on women and citizens of the Protectorate, which one do you find the most disturbing?
4. The Protector is known for having said, "A poem is as powerful as a machine gun in the right hands." What do you think he meant by this?

5. How are we seeing the concept of “unlearning” play out in the real world today?
6. We often think of history as factual. But the “truth” about history is much more complicated. What factors do you think impact history as we know it?
7. In what ways is the widows’ invisibility an asset?
8. At one point, Nicholas Hare says, “Poetry will save you.” Has a piece of literature ever had this effect on you?
9. Imagine you lived in this world where classic works of literature were rewritten and the originals burned. If you could only save one book from that fate, which one would you choose?
10. Memory plays a big role throughout the book. What is your first memory?

A Conversation with the Author

**In your mind, what do you think is next for Rose Ransom?
Where does her future take her?**

Although Rose and Oliver have been reunited and the widows have made a bid for freedom, the power of a totalitarian society runs deep. Authoritarianism, once embedded, is not easily defeated. There are usually too many vested interests at stake. So, whatever happens next, Rose's fight is far from over.

The importance and power of literature and poetry is a key theme throughout *Queen Wallis*. What role did literature play in your childhood, and how has that changed as an adult?

I was lucky to grow up at a time before screens came to dominate so much of our lives and therefore spent a lot of time reading. First, where we lived in Curaçao, then later in England, I devoured children's literature. Frances Hodgson Burnett's *A Little Princess* was my all-time favorite, and I think the story of a girl on

her own, fighting against the system, has always been my theme. School encouraged us to learn poetry by heart, and the ones I learned earliest, everything from Hilaire Belloc's "Matilda" to Shakespeare's sonnets, are still the most deeply ingrained. I studied English literature at Oxford, but once I became a journalist, the 24/7 workplace began to crowd out the long hours I had once devoted to reading. The kind of sustained concentration I used to have for the classics became harder to summon. Yet now, as time goes on, I value the escapist power of literature more than ever, probably because there are more things to escape from!

What is your favorite poem (or poems) and why?

The work of three favorite poets, Wordsworth, Blake, and T. S. Eliot, are referenced in *Queen Wallis*. Wordsworth's Immortality Ode is very important to me because it manages to express the sense all humans have of something numinous and spiritual beyond our understanding. It movingly expresses the glimpse of the sublime seen through nature, which all religions try to articulate. I think it is wonderful, hopeful, and profound. These ideas are also found in the genius poetry of William Blake. And T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* pops into my mind most days, whether I'm writing or driving through London or walking the dog.

What was the hardest scene to write?

The last one, when the Friedas leave their widowlands and make a break for freedom. I wanted to capture something of the excitement and daring that accompanies the breakdown of any

totalitarian society, whether it be the Arab Spring or the fall of the Berlin Wall. So often, freedom movements are followed by harsher crackdowns, but right at the beginning, there is a heady cocktail of hope, astonishment, and fear.

What's your advice for new writers?

Write every day. Carry a notebook, because if you don't write down those fleeting thoughts and phrases, they will be lost. Try to find an author or authors who you really admire and analyze their style. Writing is reading a lot of the time. Also, don't give up!

Do you ever get stuck while writing? How do you work your way out of it?

Definitely! Plot is the hardest thing for me. I can feel the emotional gamut of a novel, but the difficulty comes in making all the plot strands tie up. For this reason, it's a good idea to have a sketch of your entire story before you start. On a more basic note, getting up and making tea is a great way of breaking the logjam.