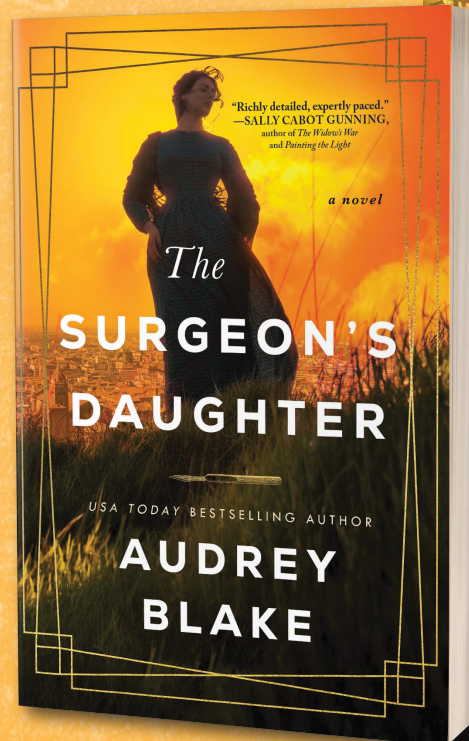


READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Discuss the ways that, despite her admission to a prestigious medical school, Nora still faces oppression.
2. Compare Nora and Magdalena. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different?
3. Vickery refuses to let children with typhus into St. Barts, as the risk of contagion is very high. How did you feel about his decision? To what extent do you agree or disagree with it?
4. Characterize Nora's relationship with Pozzi. How did their friendship develop?
5. While women like Nora and Magdalena are unconventional, there are plenty of women in this narrative who have limited agency. Discuss these characters—how do you think they feel? In what ways are they restricted? Do they seem satisfied with their situations?
6. While today the Cesarean section is a common procedure, at its inception it was considered controversial. Why is that?
7. As the only female student of medicine, Nora faces many obstacles. What are they? Do women in STEAM still face any of them today?
8. Daniel and Croft network with the elite to raise funds for their research. How did you feel about that? Did you view it as dishonest, or a necessary evil?
9. While the largely male medical establishment was determined to keep women out, many female professionals still contributed to the field. What kinds of work did they do?
10. Though her gender is often a barrier to opportunities, in some ways Nora's identity as a woman gives her advantages while treating patients. What are they?



The SURGEON'S DAUGHTER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

AUDREY BLAKE

“I tore through Audrey Blake’s *The Surgeon’s Daughter* without pause. This *richly detailed, expertly paced saga of the only female student attending a prestigious medical school in Italy* brought into crystal focus the many obstacles a nineteenth century woman faced—at either end of the scalpel. In Nora Beady Blake has created *a truly captivating heroine*, for then and for now.”

—SALLY CABOT GUNNING,
author of *The Widow’s War* and *Painting the Light*

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHORS



AUDREY BLAKE

has a split personality—because she is the creative alter ego of Regina Sirois and Jaima Fixsen, two authors who met online in a survivor style writing contest. They live 1500 miles apart, but both are prairie girls: Jaima hails from Alberta, Canada, and Regina from the wheatfields of Kansas. Both are addicted to history, words, and stories of redoubtable women, and agree that their friendship, better and longer lasting than any other prize, is proof that good things happen in this random, crazy universe.



Historically, women's health has not been the primary focus of male medical professionals. So, what made you choose to write about Caesarian sections and women's autonomy?

Jaima Fixsen: After reading the contemporary case histories, it was impossible not to write about it. I was haunted by the stories of these women and what they endured—a world away from the choices and medical care many of us enjoy. I used to take so much for granted. Women's health and reproductive rights continue to be hot button issues today, and I was intrigued by how much technology has changed yet many of the surrounding issues—and stances around them—are similar. Culturally, we tend to repeat ourselves more often than we think.

Regina Sirois: For much of medical history women were treated as smaller versions of men with a few different parts. The intricacies of our exquisite, unique bodies were not known or actively investigated. The men who studied the miracle of childbirth took very little time to ask women about the process. At times their arrogance as bystanders was astonishing. I love the study of the Caesarian section for two reasons: First, that surgery saved the lives of two of my sisters-in-laws and six of my nieces and nephews, along with many friends. It is a life-saving, family-saving, world-changing procedure. Second, in the early 1800s, childbirth was one of the few entry points into medicine for women. Midwives were a necessity of life and allowed skilled women to practice medicine in a profound way at a time when all other avenues were closed.

It's not easy to write a romantic sub-plot when your love interests are thousands of miles apart! How did you navigate that?

JF: It wasn't easy! Especially without falling into the trap of excessive pining and daydreaming—I hope we got the balance right. Real romance isn't the lightning resolution of two hundred pages of stubborn misunderstandings topped with a sunset kiss. (I love reading romance, but in this book we were trying to move away from genre conventions. Believe me, it's harder than it sounds). Strong relationships take commitment and shared goals and supporting each other. Nora and Daniel 'discovered' each other in *The Girl in His Shadow*, and this story was a chance for them to navigate some hard tests. Even though it took us a lot of revising, I enjoyed portraying a 'real life' love story where the partners are more than the sum of their individual selves. Ultimately, I think that's the kind of relationship we all want and work toward.

RS: It was easy when you love Nora and Daniel as much I do. They were too rare of finds to forfeit to a temporary separation and they both knew it. It was also satisfying to show the readers who they were individually and how they grew on their own when put in challenging positions. In their growth as people I believe there was more to love when they came back together than when they parted. It was also good to make it clear that this is not a romance novel. Their bond is core, but it is a part of a bigger story.

You clearly did extensive research to ensure the descriptions of medical procedures are accurate, but did you find it difficult to describe some of the more graphic scenes without being too gruesome? What does that balance look like?

JF: I'm not sure what this says about me, but I don't find it difficult to write about the procedures. It's easy to be there in my mind. Not so in real life. I found the anatomy labs and the surgical procedures I observed as an occupational therapy student intensely challenging. I will never forget the smell of bone dust or the greasiness of dead flesh. Useful experiences for writing, but I am so glad my day to day work as a clinician is tidy!

RS: For me I concentrated on telling the truth. What would it be like to stand right there in that moment? And if that is gory or graphic, it is also the truth of the human body, which is a marvelous creation. Accurate descriptions of life and death have never felt gruesome to me. Are they overwhelming for the senses and emotions to process? Absolutely. But never gruesome. I learned this when I fell in love with *All Quiet on the Western Front*. If you are being honest and not being gratuitous there will be beauty even when relating the most disturbing circumstances. To borrow a famous phrase from John Keats, beauty is truth, truth beauty. It is in some of the most gut-wrenching accounts of our novels that I feel the closest to the people of the past—their courage, their loss and their fortitude.

In many ways, this is a book about mothers. As parents yourselves, was the interest in this theme informed by your own experiences?

JF: I never thought about that aspect of the book until I saw this question! In some ways, I think it an incredible tribute to women that caring, nurturing, and mentoring is called mothering. But that's also an oversimplification that can be hurtful. Magdalena, as friend, teacher and role-model, fills a much different need for Nora than Mrs. Phipps, and neither woman is related to her. We all need 'mothering' from many different people, and not all of it will (or should!) come from women. That said, I loved writing the women who play such important roles for Nora, and it was important to me to populate this book with impact-making women.

RS: I had never thought of it as a book about mothers, but I love that observation. Motherhood is woven throughout the book—the loss of Nora's mother, Mrs. Phipps' mothering, Magdalena's unconventional motherhood and career, the patients fighting for their lives and the lives of their children, and even the Mother Mary of the Christian faith. And I believe that is exactly what motherhood does—it winds powerfully and essentially through all things. As a work-at-home, home school mom the time I spend empowering, teaching and nurturing my daughters is the work of my life. Nothing comes close to it in importance, magnitude or power. I believe it is a calling. A difficult, sometimes miserable one, but a miraculous one as well. My extraordinary daughters are my boldest ambition, my greatest creative work, my living magnum opus.

What do you hope your readers take away from this story?

JF: I read to discover and to experience the emotions of other people, so I hope we've succeeded in providing both without the discovery part being off-putting or dry and with emotions that are real and relatable.

RS: Knowledge! Knowledge is not proprietary; It is free for all. I hope at some obscure moment a reader will intrigue someone in a conversation by saying, "the use of ether in the late 1840s was met with controversy" or "it's important to get your tetanus boosters because it can cause muscular convulsions strong enough to break bones," or "actually, the oldest university in Europe is in Bologna, Italy." I want the knowledge I curated over years through books, research papers and antique documents to now belong completely to my readers, for their use, benefit and enjoyment.