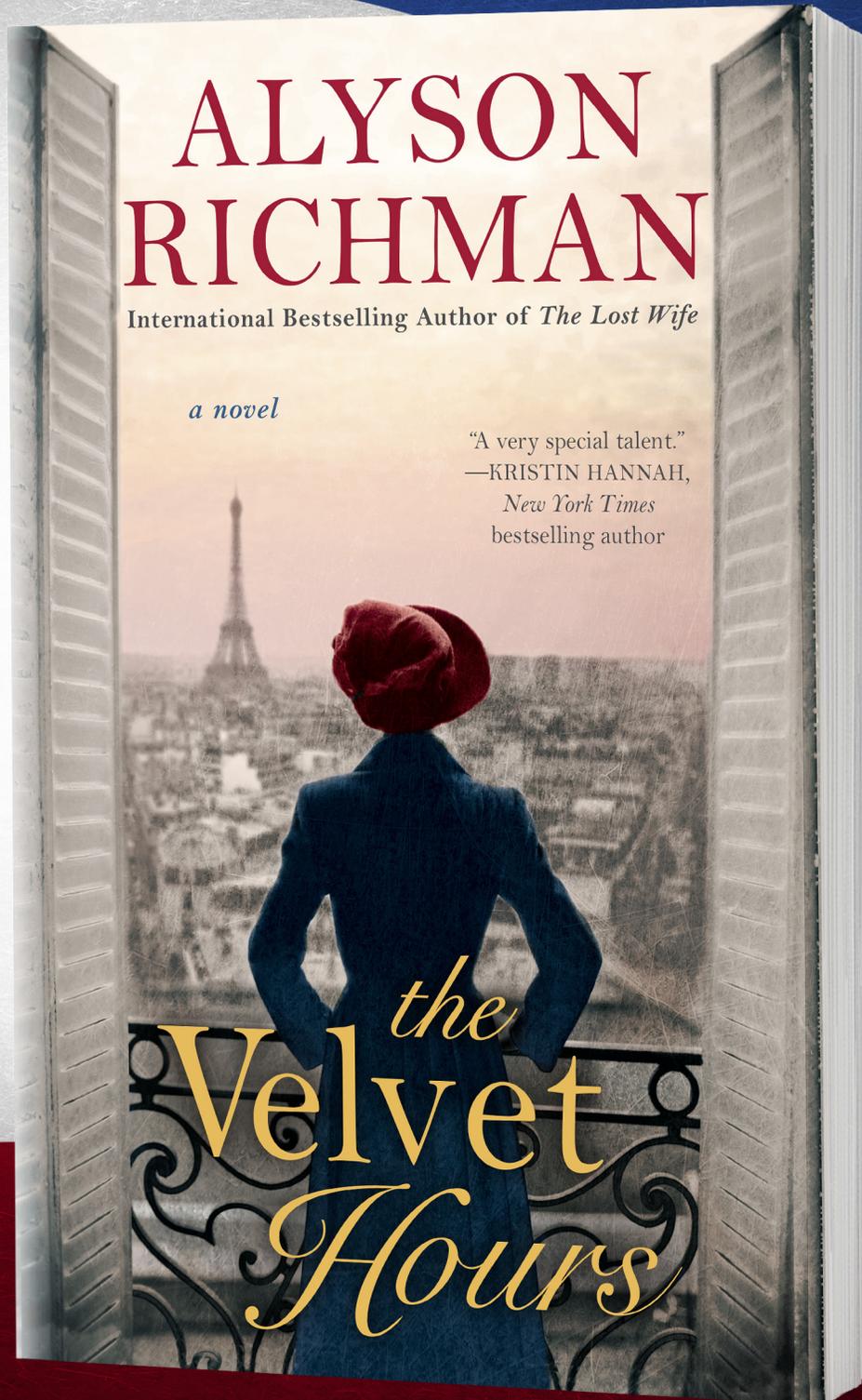


BOOK CLUB KIT



READER'S GUIDE

- 1 The author references shadow and light in the novel. Discuss the aspects of shadow and light in Marthe de Florian's life, as well as in Solange's. Do you think both women come to terms with their pasts at the end of their lives? Or is there an element of regret?
- 2 Charles gives Marthe the pearls partly as a gift of beauty, but also as a gift of financial security. Do you think Marthe does the right thing when she sells the necklace?
- 3 Marthe is not educated, yet she is immensely curious. How would you describe her self-education? Do you think her material possessions reflect her pursuit of knowledge?
- 4 Marthe belongs to the demimondaine, the world of secret pleasure. What do you think of Marthe being a kept woman? Do you think it enabled her to be more liberated than married women in French society, or was her life more restricted?
- 5 Discuss the essential role the Barcelona Haggadah played in the novel. For example, it enables Solange to learn more about her ancestry, it brings her into the Armels' bookstore and also, in the end, enables Solange and the Armels to gain safe passage. What else did the Haggadah bring to the overall story?
- 6 Above all, Marthe loves art and beauty. The author describes the sumptuous furnishings in the apartment, the butterfly- and bird-painted china, the fresh flowers, the rose-scented baths, and the gold-embossed stationery. Do we have these rituals of beauty in the twenty-first century? Are there any of these lost rituals that you'd like to bring back into your daily life?
- 7 Solange and Marthe forge an unlikely friendship. What do you think they each teach each other through their friendship?
- 8 Solange says: "What I realized at that moment was that my grandmother believed that as long as the apartment remained the way she had created it—her portrait above the mantel, her collection of porcelains, and the other pieces of art she had hand selected—she was convinced her memory would also not be extinguished." Do you think that heirlooms help us maintain a memory of our loved ones, or are our shared stories what help connect us to the past? Are the two linked? How? Is one more important than the other? Do you own something that is linked with a story, and does it connect you with the past?



BOOK CLUB ACTIVITIES



1 Have book club members wear or bring a piece of jewelry that reveals a story, much like Marthe's pearls and the butterfly clasp.

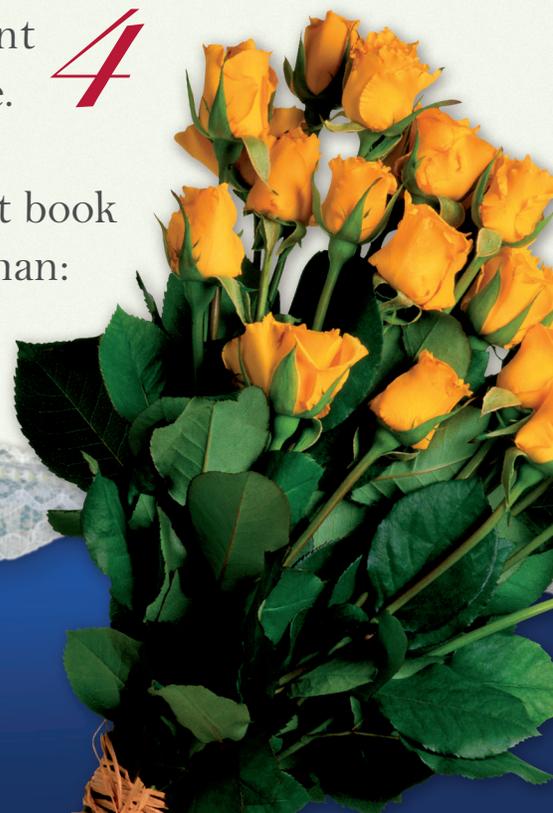


Host your book club meeting with a Parisian theme. (Croissants and macarons anyone?) **2**

3 Describe how you imagined the apartment as you read the book. Follow this link to an article about the actual, untouched Paris apartment. <http://bit.ly/UntouchedApt>

Compare your imagined apartment with the photos in the article. **4**

5 Watch this video for a great book club idea from Alyson Richman: <http://bit.ly/AlysonRichman>





Dearest Reader,

I'm so grateful for the passionate support so many fans have given over the years to my novel *The Lost Wife*, and it's my pleasure to share with you my latest novel, *The Velvet Hours*. I hope you and your book club enjoyed reading the story of Marthe de Florian as much as I enjoyed writing it.

A few years ago, I read about the discovery of an apartment in Paris that had mysteriously been shuttered for over seventy years. When the apartment was finally opened, it resembled a time capsule. A thick veil of dust covered precious antiques and gilded mirrors. Most striking of all was a magnificent portrait of the apartment's original owner, an elusive courtesan by the name of Marthe de Florian.

The portrait was painted by the famous Italian painter Giovanni Boldini, a friend and colleague of John Singer Sargent. In the portrait, Madame de Florian is painted in sumptuous, rich brushstrokes, her dress falling languidly over her shoulders and an exquisite set of pearls encircling her neck. Love letters, tied with satin ribbon, written by the artist and other suitors, were also discovered inside her vanity—suggesting that Madame de Florian enjoyed a lifetime of admirers.

After de Florian passed away in 1939, the apartment was inherited by her granddaughter, Solange, who fled Paris just prior to the German occupation. Although Solange never returned to Paris, she paid the maintenance on the apartment until her own death in 2010, leaving it as a shrine to her late grandmother.

(continued)

Marthe de Florian



I immediately became intrigued by the mystery behind this apartment. Who was Marthe de Florian and how did she come to be painted by Boldini? Who had given her the delicate pearl necklace so prominently displayed in the portrait? And why did her granddaughter, an aspiring writer, decide to close the apartment and never return, yet pay the maintenance on it for so many years?

The Velvet Hours takes you deep into the world of beauty and pleasure of the women of the *Belle Époque*, as well as the tumultuous days at the start of WWII, where I imagined the relationship between Marthe and her granddaughter Solange taking place. As Marthe tells Solange the story of her life, we follow Solange as she is drawn into the Parisian world of Jewish booksellers and holds in her possession a rare Spanish Haggadah that, much like her grandmother's pearl necklace, contains a multi-layered story all its own.

The Velvet Hours weaves together the true story of this Parisian apartment, and imagines the fascinating lives of the women who lived there. At its core, the novel examines how it isn't our possessions that are the most valuable things we have at the end of our life, but rather the stories they hold.

The book has everything I adore: a mysterious Parisian apartment filled with priceless art, a secret love affair, and a rare book collection, all set against a rich historical backdrop, Paris at the onset of WWII.

Thank you for reading!

Alyson

Marthe de Florian