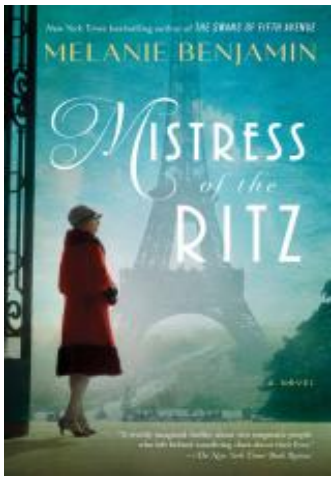
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Mistress of the Ritz

by Melanie Benjamin



About the Book

A captivating novel based on the story of the extraordinary real-life American woman who secretly worked for the French Resistance during World War II --- while playing hostess to the invading Germans at the iconic Hôtel Ritz in Paris --- from the *New York Times* bestselling author of THE AVIATOR'S WIFE and THE SWANS OF FIFTH AVENUE.

Nothing bad can happen at the Ritz; inside its gilded walls every woman looks beautiful, every man appears witty. Favored guests like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Coco Chanel and the Duke and Duchess of Windsor walk through its famous doors to be welcomed and pampered by Blanche Auzello and her husband, Claude, the hotel?s director. The Auzellos are the mistress and master of the Ritz, allowing the glamour and glitz to take their minds off their troubled marriage, and off the secrets that they keep from their guests --- and each other.

Until June 1940, when the German army sweeps into Paris, setting up headquarters at the Ritz. Suddenly, with the likes of Hermann Goëring moving into suites once occupied by royalty, Blanche and Claude must navigate a terrifying new reality. One that entails even more secrets. One that may destroy the tempestuous marriage between this beautiful, reckless American and her very proper Frenchman. For the falsehoods they tell to survive, and to strike a blow against their Nazi ?guests,? spin a web of deceit that ensnares everything and everyone they cherish.

But one secret is shared between Blanche and Claude alone --- the secret that, in the end, threatens to imperil both of their lives, and to bring down the legendary Ritz itself.

Based on true events, MISTRESS OF THE RITZ is a taut tale of suspense wrapped up in a love story for the ages, the inspiring story of a woman and a man who discover the best in each other amid the turbulence of war.

Discussion Guide

1. What is your overall opinion of Blanche Auzello? Do you find her a sympathetic character? In what ways does she change during the course of the novel? And how is she affected by her imprisonment, in particular?

2. What is your overall opinion of Claude Auzello? Do you think on balance that he's a good and loving husband to Blanche?

3. Did the Hotel Ritz come alive for you? Did it seem as if the hotel itself was a major character in the book? If so, why? How does reading a book set in one specific location compare to reading a book that uses multiple settings? How does this enhance or distract from the characters and their stories?

4. How do you feel about the way Claude served the German officers at the Ritz during the war, doing his best to please them. Do you think he could or should have treated them differently?

5. What do you think of Blanche's friend Lily? Is she a likable character? Why or why not? What is it that she has to offer that Blanche is attracted to? Do you think her effect on Blanche is positive or negative?

6. Why do you think the author wrote the novel in alternating chapters, from Claude's and Blanche's perspectives? What did she achieve with this structure that a standard third person narration would have lacked?

7. What did you come away from the novel thinking about Coco Chanel? About Ernest Hemingway? With recent allegations of Chanel's activities during the war (her alleged collaboration with the Nazis, her antisemitism), how does this change your opinion of her? How do we separate the art from the person in light of this and other more recent examples?

8. Why do you think Claude and Blanche keep it a secret from each other that they are involved in the Resistance? And, if so, what?

9. Readers learn a great deal about Paris during the German occupation from reading this novel. What are the overall impressions that you came away with after being immersed in that setting? Did the author enable you to feel the threat and fear that Parisians, especially Jews and other vulnerable groups, lived under during that time?

10. Why do you think Blanche would routinely get so drunk at the Ritz Bar with Lily, upsetting Claude and making a scene? What is it that makes her do this, and did you sympathize with her at all?

11. What do you think of Blanche and Claude's fate, as revealed in the book's Epilogue? Do you find it surprising, given that they both survived and had each other after the war, when so many couples were not so blessed? Or do you think there is a kind of tragic logic to it?

Author Bio

Melanie Benjamin is the *New York Times* bestselling author of nine works of historical fiction: ALICE I HAVE BEEN, THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MRS. TOM THUMB, THE AVIATOR?S WIFE, THE SWANS OF FIFTH AVENUE, THE GIRLS IN THE PICTURE, MISTRESS OF THE RITZ, THE CHILDREN?S BLIZZARD, CALIFORNIA GOLDEN and THE WINDSOR AFFAIR.

Her novels have been translated in over 15 languages, featured in national magazines such as *Good Housekeeping*, *People* and *Entertainment Weekly*, and optioned for film.

Melanie is a native of the Midwest, having grown up in Indianapolis, Indiana, where she pursued her first love, theater. After raising her two sons, Melanie, a lifelong reader (including being the proud winner, two years in a row, of her hometown library?s summer reading program!), decided to pursue a writing career. After writing her own parenting column for a local magazine, and winning a short story contest, Melanie published two contemporary novels under her real name, Melanie Hauser, before turning to historical fiction.

Melanie lives in Chicago with her husband. In addition to writing, she puts her theatrical training to good use by being a member of the Authors Unbound speakers bureau. When she isn?t writing or speaking, she?s reading. And always looking for new stories to tell.

Photo Credit: Maria Rivera

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