ReadingGroupGuides
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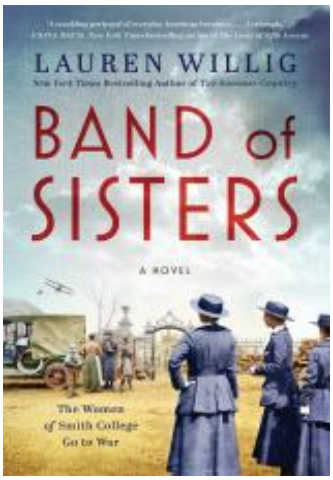
Band of Sisters

by Lauren Willig



About the Book

A group of young women from Smith College risk their lives in France at the height of World War I in this sweeping novel based on a true story --- a skillful blend of "Call the Midwife" and THE ALICE NETWORK --- from *New York Times* bestselling author Lauren Willig.

A scholarship girl from Brooklyn, Kate Moran thought she found a place among Smith?s Mayflower descendants, only to have her illusions dashed the summer after graduation. When charismatic alumna Betsy Rutherford delivers a rousing speech at the Smith College Club in April of 1917, looking for volunteers to help French civilians decimated by the German war machine, Kate is too busy earning her living to even think of taking up the call. But when her former best friend, Emmeline Van Alden, reaches out and begs her to take the place of a girl who had to drop out, Kate reluctantly agrees to join the new Smith College Relief Unit.

Four months later, Kate and 17 other Smithies, including two trailblazing female doctors, set sail for France. The volunteers are armed with money, supplies and good intentions --- all of which immediately go astray. The chateau that was to be their headquarters is a half-burnt ruin. The villagers they meet are in desperate straits: women and children huddling in damp cellars, their crops destroyed and their wells poisoned.

Despite constant shelling from the Germans, French bureaucracy and the threat of being ousted by the British army, the Smith volunteers bring welcome aid --- and hope --- to the region. But can they survive their own differences? As they cope with the hardships and terrors of the war, Kate and her colleagues find themselves navigating old rivalries and new betrayals that threaten the very existence of the Unit.

With the Germans threatening to break through the lines, can the Smith Unit pull together and truly be a band of sisters?

Discussion Guide

1. At the start of the novel, Emmie Van Alden says of the Smith College Relief Unit, ?We?re not looking for glory. Just to do something decent and worthwhile.? Do you think she --- and her fellow alumnae --- would have gone if they had realized just how difficult and dangerous the work would be? Would you have answered the call the way they did?

2. Kate and Emmie both have fraught relationships with their mothers. Emmie?s mother is ?the niece of a senator and the second cousin of a former president? and a major power broker in New York society. Kate?s mother is an Irish domestic worker. How do Kate and Emmie deliberately choose different paths from their mothers?? How does their wartime experience affect the way they perceive their mothers --- and themselves?

3. Kate reflects: ?The difference was, in college, she had really thought she was just like everyone else, that being secretary of the literary society and volunteering with the dramatic society washed out all the differences, made her one of them.? Did an elite education truly turn out to be an equalizer of social class? Does a working-class immigrant background still carry a stigma in certain corners of American society the way it did in the early 20th century?

4. How did being female make the women?s relief work in France more challenging? Were there ways they could use their gender to their advantage?

5. When Kate first realizes that Dr. Stapleton had sexually assaulted Julia, she is surprised: ?It was the unprotected women who got taken advantage of. The maids and the shopgirls. Not the Julias of the world.? Why didn?t Julia?s privilege protect her from Dr. Stapleton? How do Kate and the other women find ways to keep themselves safe once they know that he?s a predator?

6. Is Kate right to be furious when she realizes that Emmie has paid her way? How would you have reacted? What did you make of Emmie?s response when Kate finally confronts her? Was Emmie acting purely out of generosity?

7. Did your opinion of Julia change as she reveals her true circumstances --- disowned and penniless after refusing to marry for money as her mother wanted? Were you as surprised as Kate?

8. What do you think the future holds for the characters in this book after the story ends? How do you imagine their lives continuing in the years after World War I?

Author Bio

Lauren Willig is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of more than 25 works of historical fiction, including BAND OF SISTERS, THE SUMMER COUNTRY, THE ENGLISH WIFE, the RITA Award-winning *Pink Carnation* series, and five novels co-written with Beatriz Williams and Karen White.

Her books have been translated into over 20 languages, picked for Book of the Month Club, awarded the RITA, Booksellers Best and Golden Leaf awards, and chosen for the American Library Association?s annual list of the best

genre fiction.

An alumna of Yale University, she has a graduate degree in history from Harvard and a JD from Harvard Law School. She lives in New York City with her husband, two young children and vast quantities of coffee.

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