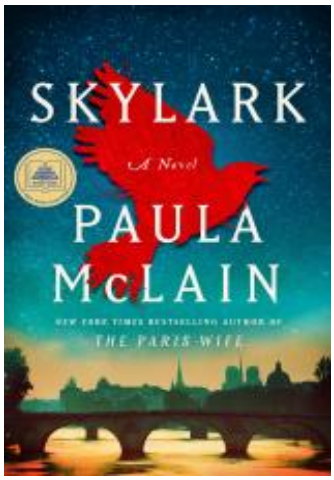
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Skylark

by Paula McLain



About the Book

The *New York Times* bestselling author of THE PARIS WIFE weaves a mesmerizing tale of Paris above and below --- where a woman?s quest for artistic freedom in 1664 intertwines with a doctor?s dangerous mission during the German occupation in the 1940s, revealing a story of courage and resistance that transcends time.

1664: Alouette Voland is the daughter of a master dyer at the famed Gobelin Tapestry Works, who secretly dreams of escaping her circumstances and creating her own masterpiece. When her father is unjustly imprisoned, Alouette's efforts to save him lead to her own confinement in the notorious Salpêtrière asylum, where thousands of women are held captive and cruelly treated. But within its grim walls, she discovers a small group of brave allies and the possibility of a life bigger than she ever imagined.

1939: Kristof Larson is a medical student beginning his psychiatric residency in Paris, whose neighbors on the Rue de Gobelins are a Jewish family who have fled Poland. When Nazi forces descend on the city, Kristof becomes their only hope for survival, even as his work as a doctor is jeopardized.

A spellbinding and transportive look at a side of Paris known to very few --- the underground city that is a mirror reflection of the glories above --- Paula McLain?s unforgettable new novel chronicles two parallel journeys of defiance and rescue that connect in ways both surprising and deeply moving.

Discussion Guide

1. SKYLARK was inspired by the real-life network of tunnels under Paris. Were you at all familiar with these and their history prior to reading the novel? What did you discover that surprised you about the history of Paris while reading SKYLARK?

2. At the start of the novel, Alouette and her father?s lives revolve entirely around the world of fabric dye. She says that colors from ?legendary crimsons, impossible indigos? to ?Tyrian purple? occupy every free space in their lives, and bleed into the occupied ones. What does their obsession reveal about their characters and about the society in which they live? What did you make of the fact that the right to wear certain colors was reserved for people of high social rank? Today, what do we infer about people from the type of colors or clothes they choose to wear?

3. Why do you think Paula McLain decided to interweave dual narratives to create this story? What do Kristof and Sasha?s narratives in World War II have in common with the stories of Alouette and the women confined in Salpêtrière in 1664, and vice versa?

4. When Alouette is walking in the orchard at Salpêtrière, she encounters the superioress tending a small, twisted sapling. She tells Alouette, ?Everything worth keeping must be tended. Sometimes at all costs.? What do you think the superioress is trying to convey to Alouette? Did her actions in the orchard change the way you thought of her?

5. When Alesander shows Kristof the tunnels for the first time, he tells Kristof that his grandfather used to say that every city has an aboveground face and a belowground face that only few remember. Have you ever experienced a city this way? If so, what did the belowground reveal that the above did not?

6. When we first meet Alouette, she feels disdain for the meaning of her name: Skylark. As she endures increasing hardship at Salpêtrière, do you think her perception of her name changes? Can you pinpoint any particular moments when she embraces her namesake?

7. Alouette?s connection to Etienne sparks just as she prepares to flee from her life in Saint-Marcel. Sasha and Gérard find one another just as anti-Semitism overtakes Paris. Love seems to find the main characters during particularly tumultuous or perhaps inopportune times. What are some of the challenges of these relationships, and what are some of the benefits?

8. The impact of an individual person?s bravery is an important theme throughout the novel. Though none of the characters in SKYLARK are responsible for the circumstances of the world in which they find themselves, they still muster the courage to save themselves and, more importantly, to try to save those around them. Did you understand why characters like Alouette and Alesander were driven to action? What does that say about resistance and why some engage in it while others do not?

9. Paris could be considered its own character in the book, from the descriptions of the Bièvre to the Seine, the rue des Gobelins, and, of course, the tunnels and catacombs. What stood out the most to you about Paris in these time periods? Did anything about the differences and similarities between the 1600s and the 1900s surprise you?

10. The treatment of psychological illness, though it would not have been known as such in Alouette?s time, is one of the many threads connecting the two time periods of the book. Discuss the parallels between the horrors at Salpêtrière and the tragic fates of Kristof?s patients at the hands of the Nazis. In what ways has our understanding of mental illness changed since the 1940s?

11. At the end of the novel, we learn about the book of colors that Alouette has collected, a catalog of the knowledge she and the women in her community in Brittany possess. How did this resolution of Alouette?s identity make you feel?

What did it reveal about the multifaceted nature of dyeing and about women?s work more generally?

12. While Alouette?s story ends definitively, Sasha and Kristof?s stories do not. How do you imagine their stories might continue after the end of the book?

Author Bio

Paula McLain is the *New York Times* bestselling author of six novels, including THE PARIS WIFE, CIRCLING THE SUN and LOVE AND RUIN, as well as two collections of poetry and a memoir. Her work has been published in over 35 countries and featured in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Town & Country*, *Real Simple* and elsewhere.

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