

The American Agent: A Maisie Dobbs Novel

by Jacqueline Winspear



About the Book

Beloved heroine Maisie Dobbs, “one of the great fictional heroines” (*Parade*), investigates the mysterious murder of an American war correspondent in London during the Blitz in a page-turning tale of love and war, terror and survival.

When Catherine Saxon, an American correspondent reporting on the war in Europe, is found murdered in her London digs, news of her death is concealed by British authorities. Serving as a linchpin between Scotland Yard and the Secret Service, Robert MacFarlane pays a visit to Maisie Dobbs, seeking her help. He is accompanied by an agent from the US Department of Justice --- Mark Scott, the American who helped Maisie escape Hitler’s Munich in 1938. MacFarlane asks Maisie to work with Scott to uncover the truth about Saxon’s death.

As the Germans unleash the full terror of their blitzkrieg upon the British Isles, raining death and destruction from the skies, Maisie must balance the demands of solving this dangerous case with her need to protect Anna, the young evacuee she has grown to love and wants to adopt. Entangled in an investigation linked to the power of wartime propaganda and American political intrigue being played out in Britain, Maisie will face losing her dearest friend --- and the possibility that she might be falling in love again.

Discussion Guide

1. In what ways, practical and profound, was the popular emergence of radio significant during WWII?
2. Who should own and control such a powerful broadcast medium? What’s the difference between information and propaganda? What is “soft propaganda”? What might it mean that, “truth is always a victim of war”?

3. What were Catherine Saxon's strengths as a person and as a journalist? How was she able to break into a field so dominated by men?
4. Consider the many men of power in the novel --- fathers, husbands, bosses, politicians, etc. What attitudes does each hold toward women? How does this manifest in his behavior toward them? What explains why he might be oppressive toward or supportive of a woman's endeavors?
5. How do various women throughout the novel work to establish or enact their power against the oppressive forces of personal or institutional patriarchy?
6. What are the many and important roles for women during a war? What might it mean that, "war might be considered a man's game, but women always ended up where there were wars, and suffered the lingering scars."
7. As a worker for the London Auxiliary Ambulance Service, Maisie "was drawing upon skills she'd honed in two wars." What are these skills? What personal and wartime experiences assist or burden her during her current investigation?
8. How do Maisie's love and responsibility for Anna affect her during the investigation? What is difficult for Anna about their current situation? In what ways is "the crying chair" important?
9. What is Mark Scott like? What does Maisie find attractive about him? In what ways is he helpful to Maisie or not? How is their relationship affected by the fact that he must be secretive about his work and that "she trusted him with her life, but did not trust his word"?
10. What were various reasons some Americans were "isolationists" regarding the war in Europe? What arguments were being made for American involvement?
11. In what ways are her memories of Dr. Maurice Blanche helpful to Maisie? What might it mean that "coincidence is a messenger sent by truth"?
12. Dr. Dene strongly suggests that Priscilla and Douglas Partridge shouldn't "mollycoddle" their son Tom after he lost an arm, or else "he'll be a mouthy monster." What's the healthiest way to support and help someone who's suffered such a traumatic injury? What institutional support should be in place to fully treat physically and emotionally injured veterans?
13. Pamela Lockwood loves to escape to the movies, and Polly Harcourt believes that if "Hitler...stops us laughing and having some fun...[he's] won." What's the role of entertainment in a time of war? In what ways is laughter appropriate and important or not?
14. Maisie agrees with an article that claims that "our minds and our moral natures just cannot respond to the bombardment of contradiction and confusion" radio broadcasts deliver. What does this mean? Why might "a rapid...succession of emotional experiences" be "bewildering"? In what ways does the Internet further prove this idea or not?

15. What are the arguments for or against the use of the Children's Overseas Reception Board during wartime to send children to safety in other distant countries?

16. Despite her constant search for truth, Maisie admits the irony that "lies were often protectors of the truth --- unless they became too powerful." What might she mean? What could be considered necessary lies? What determines when a lie has become "too powerful"?

17. What made the work of broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow so powerful? What do the excerpts from his reports add to the novel? What were the effects of such reporting?

18. Maisie admonishes herself for thinking about her romantic relationship with Mark Scott "when so many civilians had been killed and injured." What is an appropriate balance of personal and social concern during wartime? What personal sacrifices should be required? What must people maintain in their personal lives?

19. Maisie is struck by a line from a poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "Love, when so you're loved again." What might this mean? Why is it important in her current situation?

20. What is "independence of spirit"? Who in the novel demonstrates such a force? In what ways is it important to a successful life or not?

Author Bio

Jacqueline Winspear is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling Maisie Dobbs series, which includes *THE AMERICAN AGENT*, *TO DIE BUT ONCE*, *IN THIS GRAVE HOUR*, *JOURNEY TO MUNICH*, *A DANGEROUS PLACE*, *LEAVING EVERYTHING MOST LOVED* and *ELEGY FOR EDDIE*. Her stand-alone novel, *THE CARE AND MANAGEMENT OF LIES*, was also a *New York Times* bestseller and a Dayton Literary Peace Prize finalist. Originally from the United Kingdom, she now lives in California.

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