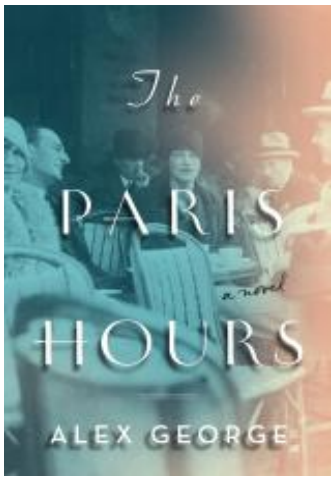
The Paris Hours

by Alex George



About the Book

One day in the City of Light. One night in search of lost time.

Paris between the wars teems with artists, writers and musicians, a glittering crucible of genius. But amidst the dazzling creativity of the city?s most famous citizens, four regular people are each searching for something they?ve lost.

Camille was the maid of Marcel Proust, and she has a secret: when she was asked to burn her employer?s notebooks, she saved one for herself. Now she is desperate to find it before her betrayal is revealed. Souren, an Armenian refugee, performs puppet shows for children that are nothing like the fairy tales they expect. Lovesick artist Guillaume is down on his luck and running from a debt he cannot repay --- but when Gertrude Stein walks into his studio, he wonders if this is the day everything could change. And Jean-Paul is a journalist who tells other people?s stories, because his own is too painful to tell. When the quartet?s paths finally cross in an unforgettable climax, each discovers if they will find what they are looking for.

Told over the course of a single day in 1927, THE PARIS HOURS takes four ordinary people whose stories, told together, are as extraordinary as the glorious city they inhabit.

Discussion Guide

1. Of the four interwoven storylines that comprise the novel --- Souren?s, Guillaume?s, Jean-Paul?s and Camille?s --- did you have a favorite? If so, why?

2. Discuss the epigraph: ?For, while the tale of how we suffer, and how we are delighted, and how we may triumph is never new, it always must be heard. There isn?t any other tale to tell, it?s the only light we?ve got in all this darkness.? Do you agree? How does this novel carry out James Baldwin?s directive?

3. Guillaume tells Suzanne that ?any street or square in Paris would give the Folies-Bergère a run for its money.? How does Paris itself become a character in this book? If you have spent time in Paris, did the portrait ring true? Were you surprised by any aspects of it?

4. Younis tells Souren, ?We?ll always be from somewhere else, won?t we?? In what ways does Souren?s Armenian background shape his identity? Do you have to be from a place to belong to it? How does Souren?s experience resonate with current debates around immigration?

5. When Suzanne sits for Guillaume, the painting he creates is not of her body but of a cottage in the forest with a door set high on the façade. What did you make of his painting? What resonance does it have throughout the novel?

6. After Suzanne and Guillaume?s night together, Suzanne has no interest in seeing him again: ?I want to remember us exactly like this. No fights, no disappointments. No broken hearts. Just a perfect memory.? Do you empathize with her decision? Is a perfect memory sometimes worth sacrificing a potential relationship?

7. Discuss Jean-Paul?s view of the Eiffel Tower: ?The combination of first-rate mechanical engineering and such manifest uselessness strikes him as being particularly, deliciously, French.? What does he mean? Does that description of French identity ring true with regard to any other characters or events in this novel?

8. Discuss how each of the main characters continues to be pulled back into the past. Proust tells Camille, ?The only place where you can regain lost paradises is in yourself.? In what ways are the characters? attempts to regain their lost paradises helpful or hurtful?

9. Every day, Souren puts on puppet shows in the Jardin du Luxembourg: ?He tells his stories to communicate, to connect with others.... The gasps from the audience, the cries of alarm, the applause --- this is how he knows he is alive.? Do you sympathize with his belief that art requires audience reception to be meaningful? How do other characters? views of art differ in this novel? Discuss the tension between isolation and connection that characterizes the artists? experiences.

10. Although Souren speaks Armenian when he performs puppet shows, his audience can?t understand what he is saying. When he overhears two men speaking to one another in Armenian, then, he is deeply affected: ?What moved him about the conversation...was not hearing his native language spoken, but hearing it understood. That sense of connection is what he misses so badly.? What does he mean? Do you agree that there are forms of connection that can only be achieved through one?s native language?

11. Jean-Paul remembers one of his grandfather?s beatings during his childhood, after he catches him throwing pebbles at swans. He reflects on the severity of the punishment: ?It was only after Elodie was born that Jean-Paul understood that it was the ferocity of the old man?s love for him that had prompted such severe retribution. Love like that raises the stakes.? Does that make sense to you? Are there other instances in this novel where love and cruelty are connected in surprising ways?

12. When Guillaume despairs that he will have to leave Paris without ever learning the truth about his daughter, a priest urges him to find her: ?We only get so many chances at happiness. I think we should take every single one of them.? What happiness is available to the different characters in this novel? How much agency do they have to pursue it?

13. When Camille learns that Proust wrote down her secret, she is furious: ?He was a thief, a pirate. He plundered other people?s lives for his own ends.? Do you agree? Are all writers thieves of a sort? If so, do the ends justify the means?

14. Jean-Paul reflects on Josephine Baker: ?All he knows about her is exactly what she wanted him to know. She is the most famous person in Paris, but her celebrity is a mask. That dazzling smile was a suit of armor, hiding her from view.? This novel is peppered with famous historical figures --- Baker, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, Marcel Proust --- yet they remain on the periphery of the novel, not at its heart. What do you make of that narrative decision? What does the novel seem to be saying about celebrity?

15. Jean-Paul tells Josephine that ?everyone is running toward somewhere?: ?We?re always gazing toward the horizon, searching for the next adventure. And those who are trapped still dream helplessly, obsessively.? Do you agree? How do the characters in this novel confirm or contradict his assessment of the human condition?

16. Were you surprised by the twist at the very end of the book?

17. What is the effect of setting the entire novel over the course of just one day? What do you think the future holds for these characters?

Author Bio

A native of England, Alex George read law at Oxford University and worked for eight years as a corporate lawyer in London and Paris. He has lived in the Midwest of the United States for the last 16 years. He is the founder and director of the Unbound Book Festival, and is the owner of Skylark Bookshop, an independent bookstore in downtown Columbia, Missouri.

Alex is the author of THE PARIS HOURS, A GOOD AMERICAN and SETTING FREE THE KITES.

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