

# The Paris Library

by Janet Skeslien Charles

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## About the Book

**Based on the true World War II story of the heroic librarians at the American Library in Paris, this is an unforgettable story of romance, friendship, family and the power of literature to bring us together, perfect for fans of LILAC GIRLS and THE PARIS WIFE.**

*Paris, 1939:* Young and ambitious Odile Souchet has it all: her handsome police officer beau and a dream job at the American Library in Paris. When the Nazis march into Paris, Odile stands to lose everything she holds dear, including her beloved library. Together with her fellow librarians, Odile joins the Resistance with the best weapons she has: books. But when the war finally ends, instead of freedom, Odile tastes the bitter sting of unspeakable betrayal.

*Montana, 1983:* Lily is a lonely teenager looking for adventure in small-town Montana. Her interest is piqued by her solitary, elderly neighbor. As Lily uncovers more about her neighbor's mysterious past, she finds that they share a love of language, the same longings and the same intense jealousy, never suspecting that a dark secret from the past connects them.

A powerful novel that explores the consequences of our choices and the relationships that make us who we are --- family, friends and favorite authors --- **THE PARIS LIBRARY** shows that extraordinary heroism can sometimes be found in the quietest of places.

## Discussion Guide

1. Chapter 1 begins with Odile noting that "numbers floated round my head like stars" (3) as she runs through the Dewey Decimal system in her head. What does this opening say about her?
2. When Odile is first introduced as Mrs. Gustafson, Lily notes that she "donned her Sunday best --- a pleated skirt and

- high heels --- just to take out the trash. A red belt showed off her waist. Always.? (10) What does the red belt represent? And why, at the end of the novel, does she replace her tatty red belt with a stylish black one?? (344)
3. Miss Reeder was adamant that there was a place here for everyone? (3) at the Library. How do she and others like Boris and the Countess prove that throughout the Occupation?
  4. Odile and Lily come from very different backgrounds, different countries and different eras. Where do they find common ground?
  5. Among the Library's subscribers and habitués are many fascinating and eccentric characters, such as Professor Cohen and Mr. Pryce-Jones. Who is your favorite, and why?
  6. Consider Odile's Aunt Caroline, and how Caro's experience informs Odile's decisions regarding Paul and Buck. Do you believe Odile's assertion that her mother would cast me out, just like Aunt Caro?? (332)
  7. Why do you think Janet Skeslien Charles decided to interweave Lily's story, set in Montana in the 1980s, with Odile's story in Paris during World War II? What do the dual narratives reveal, and how do they reflect on each other?
  8. How is Lily's adolescence in Montana similar to Odile's own coming of age in Paris? How do books and learning the French language serve as a refuge for Lily?
  9. Odile refers to Bitsi as her bookmate? (50) and later reflects on their experiences by noting that coming face-to-face with Bitsi is like looking in the mirror? (166). How does their friendship develop over the course of the novel?
  10. When Professor Cohen finishes her manuscript, she knows she cannot publish it, and she entrusts it to Odile, saying, Books and ideas are like blood; they need to circulate, and they keep us alive. Without you, I couldn't have continued this long. You've reminded me that there's good in the world? (240). What does this speech mean to you? Does this serve as greater motivation for Odile to continue her work?
  11. Odile discovers the crow letters, letters and denunciations...from black-hearted people who spy on neighbors, colleagues, and friends. Even family members? (283) in her father's office. Lily, too, finds the letters at Odile's house. What do these letters, signed by one who knows, show? Why do you think the author includes them?
  12. Toward the end of the novel, after the Liberation, we see the insidious cycle of violence as Paul and his colleagues attack Margaret, stating, She wasn't a woman to them, not anymore. They'd been beaten and humiliated. Now it was their turn to beat, to strike, to slash? (312). How does this event change the course of the novel? How do these men perpetuate the cycle of violence? Would you have reacted as Odile does, or what would you have done differently?
  13. At the end of the novel, Odile says that it seemed that life had offered me an epilogue? (342). How does Lily and Odile's intergenerational friendship provide them both with a safe place to grow?

## Author Bio

Janet Skeslien Charles is the award-winning author of *MOONLIGHT IN ODESSA*, which was published in 10 languages. Her shorter work has appeared in revues such as *Slice* and *Montana Noir*. Janet first became interested in the incredible true story of the librarians who stood up to the Nazi "Book Protector" when she worked as the program's manager at the American Library in Paris. Her novel *THE PARIS LIBRARY* was published in 30 countries. She divides her time between Montana and Paris.

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