

BOOK CLUB KIT

Includes a letter from the author,
discussion questions, a recipe & more



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The Warsaw Sisters: A Novel of World War II Poland
by Amanda Barratt

In WWII Poland, two sisters fight against the darkness engulfing their homeland, one by entering a daring network of women sheltering Jewish children and the other by joining the ranks of Poland's secret army. As Warsaw buckles under German oppression, they must rely on the courage that calls the ordinary to resist.

FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

What a privilege it is to share *The Warsaw Sisters* with you—a novel of the women whose resistance and resilience illuminated the darkness of war-torn Poland and a tribute to the enduring bond of sisterhood. If you and your book club have chosen this novel to read together, thank you! Book groups are close to my heart, as both an author and an avid reader. What better way to spend an evening—or any time of day—than by gathering with friends, sharing coffee or tea, and exploring the power of story? When books bring us together, our lives are enriched twofold—by the stories themselves and by the community they forge.

Visiting book clubs is always a joy. If you would like to schedule a virtual visit with me, please reach out through the contact form on my website, and I'll be in touch. Book clubs will also receive, upon request, a special package with signed bookplates, bookmarks, and other treats for your group to enjoy.

Thank you for journeying with *The Warsaw Sisters*.

With gratitude,

Amanda

DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. Antonina and Helena respond in different ways to the occupation of their homeland, and, as the novel progresses, they are each changed by the paths they choose and the circumstances they endure. Which of the sisters do you relate to more?
2. Early in the novel, Marek tells Antonina, “What gives life meaning must always be preserved.” This statement applies not only to music, art, and literature but also to our most fundamental values. In what ways do various characters seek to preserve that which gives life meaning?
3. What motivates Marek when he tells Antonina not to return to the ghetto? Is he acting out of love for her or pressure from his family, or is he simply acknowledging the futility of their relationship?
4. Antonina conceals her involvement in rescuing Jewish children because she fears putting Helena at risk. To keep this secret, Antonina distances herself from her sister. Do you agree with Antonina’s decision to abandon Helena at the cost of protecting her? Was Antonina justified in her actions? What other choices did she have?
5. “Grief was a blade, slicing deep, cutting your heart to shreds. With time, the blade grew dull, your heart numb. But you still bled.” If you’ve experienced the loss of someone close to you, does this quote resonate with you? How do Antonina and Helena cope with loss—the deaths of their father and Aunt Basia as well as Antonina’s loss of Marek? Is it ever possible to truly heal from grief, or do we simply find a way to live while carrying it?
6. Why do you think Helena is drawn to Werner Reinhardt? Is Werner attracted to Helena in a romantic sense, or is he simply treating her with kindness out of guilt for the actions of his countrymen?
7. Discuss the different forms of resistance practiced throughout the novel: Antonina’s involvement in Irena Sendler’s network, Helena’s role in the Home Army, and Marek and Rutka’s participation in the ghetto uprising. Even the Jewish families who give their children into the care of strangers choose a kind of resistance. What defines resistance? What motivates resistance? What fundamental qualities do various forms of resistance share?
8. Marek and Rutka each decide to return to the ghetto and take part in the uprising even after Antonina offers them aid and shelter. Why do you think they choose resistance over a chance at survival? Is their decision rooted in hopelessness, a bond with their comrades, or something else? What choice would you have made?

9. In what ways were the experiences of women in occupied Poland unique? How did gender shape their choices, their suffering? Their vulnerabilities, their strengths?

10. A pivotal moment for Helena is when she is asked to choose a pseudonym upon joining the Home Army. How does “becoming” Emilia change her? How had Helena defined herself before? How are we defined by the identities we give ourselves?

11. Antonina’s journey takes her from sheltering the children of others to becoming a mother herself. After Kasia is born, she thinks, “I hadn’t known what it meant before, a mother’s love. Perhaps it isn’t the sort of thing you truly understand until you know it in the depths of yourself. Like breath, its force fills every part of you and gives you life. Maybe it breaks you in a way, loving like this, because it has the power to wound you like nothing else, and once touched by it, you can never return to who you once were.” How does motherhood change Antonina? On a personal level, if you’ve experienced motherhood, how has it changed you?

12. At Broniek and Jasia’s engagement party, Helena reflects, “To know what it is to be shattered by love and yet take hold of it again with all that is tenuous and vulnerable . . . perhaps few acts of courage are so great.” Why is love one of the most courageous acts of all?

13. When Antonina discovers Helena’s participation in the resistance, she is stunned that her quiet, unadventurous sister would take such a risk. “Maybe that was how I’d chosen to see her, the sister I had known, or thought I did. Perhaps it’s one of the ironies of family: the ones we know best become those we truly see the least.” Have you ever found this to be true—either in your perception of someone else or another person’s perception of you?

14. Were you familiar with the Warsaw Uprising prior to reading the novel? If so, did discovering this historic event through the eyes of the characters provide a different perspective? If you weren’t familiar with the history of the uprising, what surprised you most?

15. During the uprising, Helena tells Andrzej, “Perhaps courage is to be afraid, but to hold on still until the end.” Do you agree with Helena’s definition? How do you define courage?

16. “The mark of His presence is not in the absence of pain.” After Jasia’s death, Father Paweł shares these words with Helena. Take a moment to talk about this statement. Is there an aspect of either sister’s faith journey that resonates with you? How do we seek God in the midst of suffering?

17. At the beginning of the novel, Helena is young and naive. By the end, she has become a woman shaped by war and a soldier who faced the horrors of battle alongside her comrades. Discuss Helena's journey. What are some of her defining moments? Do you think Helena would have gone on that same journey if the rift with her sister had not occurred? In what ways are we strengthened by the circumstances that break us?

18. "For as the tide ebbs, but in the end returns, so too is the bond between sisters. Changing yet changeless. Indelible. Unbreakable." This statement is at the heart of *The Warsaw Sisters*. How does Antonina and Helena's relationship change as they are altered by their individual journeys? By the end of the novel, is their bond ultimately stronger than it was at the beginning?

19. In the final chapter, Antonina ponders the future: "What the coming years would hold could be answered only by time. Darkness still hung over Poland. Perhaps it would not lift for a long while." The historical note gives a glimpse into the realities of life in Poland under the communist regime and the brutal consequences often meted out to those who had belonged to the Home Army. What do you believe the future holds for Helena and Andrzej/Stefan? What about Antonina and Kasia?

20. Which part of the story did you find the most poignant? The most heartbreaking? What will you remember most about *The Warsaw Sisters*?

PLAYLIST

If *The Warsaw Sisters* had a soundtrack . . .

I created a YouTube playlist of music that inspired the novel. The link can be found on the "For Book Clubs" page on my website. Here are a few of my favorites on the playlist.

"Étude in E Major, Op. 10 No. 3" (Arrangement), composed by Frédéric Chopin.

I listened to this on repeat while writing the scene in which Antonina and Marek play their duet in chapter 5. This achingly wistful Chopin étude is the perfect theme for their love story.

"Jesienne róże" (Autumn Roses), performed by Mieczysław Fogg.

This is the song Helena and Andrzej dance to at Broniek and Jasia's engagement party in chapter 24.

"Hej, chłopcy, bagnet na broń" (Hey, Boys, Fix Bayonets).

In chapter 27, Helena's comrades sing this song around the piano. It was one of the most popular melodies of the Warsaw Uprising.

KOŁACZKI

These jam-filled cookies are popular in Poland during the Christmas season but are a treat at any time of the year. They look so pretty, with richly hued jam nestled in buttery folds of pastry and a dusting of powdered sugar adding a bit of extra sweetness. They are the perfect dessert to share with your book group!

Ingredients

- 12 ounces (3 sticks) unsalted butter, softened
- 8 ounces cream cheese, softened
- 1 teaspoon almond extract
- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1–1½ cups jam or fruit preserves (Be sure the jam you choose has a thicker consistency, so it doesn't seep out during baking. Bonne Maman raspberry jam works well.)
- Powdered sugar for rolling out the dough and sprinkling on the cookies after baking



Instructions

In a large mixing bowl, cream softened butter and cream cheese until smooth at medium-high speed. Add almond extract.

Add salt and flour in three additions, scraping down the sides of the bowl as needed, stirring just to incorporate. Be careful not to overmix.

Form the dough into a ball and transfer to a piece of plastic wrap. Flatten the dough into a square and cover with the plastic wrap. Chill in the refrigerator for 1 hour.

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Line two baking sheets with parchment paper and set aside. After the dough has chilled, sprinkle your clean countertop and a rolling pin with powdered sugar.

Roll the dough into a large square approximately ¼ inch thick and cut into 2½ inch squares using a sharp knife or pizza cutter. Carefully transfer the squares to the baking sheets and place ½ teaspoon of jam or preserves in the center of each square.

Fold one corner of the pastry square over the filling, then repeat the process on the opposite side so the corners overlap in the center. Place a toothpick in the center of each cookie to hold in place during baking.

Bake for 10–12 minutes, until the corners of the cookies are slightly golden. Let rest on the baking sheet for around five minutes before transferring cookies to a rack to finish cooling. Once the cookies have cooled, carefully remove the toothpicks and dust the cookies with powdered sugar. Enjoy!

A CONVERSATION WITH AMANDA

What inspired you to write *The Warsaw Sisters*?

The theme of women's experiences in war is found in many of my novels, and it's a topic that ceaselessly inspires and intrigues me. While researching Poland during the Second World War, I discovered accounts of women whose dauntless courage and extraordinary heroism left me in awe. Women who smuggled Jewish children out of the Warsaw ghetto and sheltered them in their homes, risking their lives to protect the most vulnerable. Women who joined the resistance and fought in the Warsaw Uprising, suffering and sacrificing as soldiers. The stories of these women are profoundly compelling, and I wrote *The Warsaw Sisters* as a tribute to them.

What sort of research was required to bring this story to the page?

While researching my last novel, *Within These Walls of Sorrow*, I encountered many of the historical events that inspired *The Warsaw Sisters*. The research process for my last book flowed almost seamlessly into this one as I delved deeper into Poland's wartime history. I relied on more than a hundred nonfiction titles, including numerous firsthand accounts, to gain a perspective of the historical panorama as well as the deeply personal experiences of individuals. Many of the scenes in the novel are drawn from these sources. One of the most memorable experiences of the research process came when I visited a museum that housed a collection of artifacts related to the Polish resistance and the Warsaw Uprising. Though the museum was closed due to renovations, the director generously gave me a tour and even allowed me to don gloves and handle some of the artifacts. I'll never forget standing in front of a case that held copies of the newspaper published by the Polish underground and holding a helmet worn by a Home Army soldier during the uprising. History I had long been researching became so tangible in those moments.

What first drew you to Poland as the setting for *The Warsaw Sisters*?

In the midst of one of the most brutal occupation regimes faced by any European country during the Second World War, extraordinary resistance was born. Still, Poland's wartime history remains relatively unknown, especially in North America. Throughout my research, I discovered myriad accounts of courage birthed by adversity that begged to be explored through a narrative format. As the great-granddaughter of Polish immigrants, I have a special affinity for Poland's history and culture. It is my hope this novel will illuminate both the tragedy of the war and the heroism of the people of Poland. It's a deep privilege to explore their stories, and I hope to continue to do so.

What was the writing process like?

Every story I write is a journey alongside my characters. As the characters in *The Warsaw Sisters* experienced the horror and devastation of war, my heart broke for them and with them. Though I carefully chose what to “show” on the page, I felt it was deeply important to authentically portray the realities of life in occupied Poland, as doing otherwise would, I believe, have been a grave disservice to the ones who lived those experiences. Telling the story through the eyes of the characters necessitated depicting what they endured and witnessed. Though the two protagonists are fictional, all of the most harrowing scenes in the novel are drawn from firsthand accounts.

What do you hope readers will gain from reading *The Warsaw Sisters*?

There is so much we can learn from searching the past, so many questions we can ask ourselves, so much that remains unchanged even as so much has changed. I hope readers are inspired by the stories of what I call “the sparks of light in the night of war, the ordinary who quietly resisted” and find relevance within them. I pray the novel will also be a reminder that, even in times of tragedy, we are not forsaken in the sight of the One who calls us His and holds our every moment in His hands.



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