

Intelligence in Public Media

The Secrets We Kept (A Novel)

Lara Prescott (Alfred A. Knopf, 2019—Kindle Edition), 349 pages in print.

Reviewed by J. E. Leonardson

Few writers are as lucky as Lara Prescott. Her debut novel, *The Secrets We Kept*, was auctioned for \$2 million and before the 200,000-copy print run was delivered in late summer 2019, the movie rights were sold as well. With such a large investment to protect, Prescott's publisher's publicity department made her available for interviews that led to gushing prepublication profiles in the *New York Times*, *New York* magazine, on NPR, and various websites. It should surprise no one that *The Secrets We Kept* hit the *Times* bestseller list almost immediately after it appeared.

Good fortune, indeed, but does the book justify the hype? The answer is more complicated than usual for spy novels. First, *The Secrets We Kept* is a spy novel only under an expansive definition of the genre. On one level a novel about women in the CIA in the 1950s, *The Secrets We Kept* is also about class and gender, the role of ideas and literature in politics, Cold War culture, and recovering lost histories. In that sense, it is better described as being about the world of intelligence than about espionage. While certainly a compellingly written and interesting book for an intelligence audience, how individual readers react to it will depend entirely on how they decide to approach it.

On the surface *The Secrets We Kept* is a straightforward historical novel. Irina Drozdova, a young Russian American woman, is hired in the mid-1950s to be a typist at CIA. Assigned to the large, all-female typing pool at the agency's early headquarters on E Street, she spends her days clattering away on her machine until she is chosen for operational training, though not as a case officer but rather as a support asset—"We're good at spotting hidden talent," her boss tells her.

Meanwhile, Prescott cuts away to Moscow, telling the story of how Boris Pasternak and his mistress/muse Olga Ivinskaya, collaborate to write *Doctor Zhivago* and smuggle it to the West. When CIA realizes the propaganda and political potential of *Doctor Zhivago*, Irina

is assigned to the operation to print Russian copies and smuggle them to the Soviet Union.^a The operation is a success, and Irina goes on to a long career in operations.

This, of course, is only one part of the story. The second main thread of the plot concerns Irina's coming of age and understanding of herself. It begins conventionally, as Irina and the officer who trains her, Teddy, become a couple and then become engaged. (Teddy's upper-class background, so common in the CIA of the 1950s, stands in contrast to that of Irina's, who grew up on the edge of poverty.) At work, however, Irina meets Sally Forrester, who had been a star officer in the OSS but in the postwar agency is relegated to clerical work and other duties believed suitable for women. Irina and Sally gradually realize that their true passion is for each other and, after an agonizing period of indecision, Irina breaks off her engagement to Teddy. Unfortunately, the CIA of the 1950s was not inclined to tolerate lesbians on the staff, no matter how talented or discreet, and as rumors about her swirl and a boss assaults her, Sally is fired; Irina saves her own job only by lying with the skillfulness Teddy taught her.

Prescott employs an unusual technique to tell this story. The narrator gradually fades into the background as the various characters—Irina, Sally, Olga, Teddy, and a number of others—tell the story in their own voices and from their own points of view. The effect is to make *The Secrets We Kept* read like an oral history, a device that to my knowledge has not been used before in intelligence fiction, and also enhances the impression that the forgotten women of the CIA's early days are now telling their stories.

This works best with Irina. As Prescott fills in her biography and portrays her work life, Irina becomes a sympathetic and engaging character. Just as interesting as her gradual falling in love with Sally, moreover, is Irina's discovery of how she can break free of the subordinate roles and strict limits into which 1950s society and the CIA forced women. Early on, she says, "I preferred

a. For the true story of the operation to distribute *Zhivago*, see Peter Finn and Petra Couvec, *The Zhivago Affair* (Pantheon, 2014). The book was reviewed in *Studies in Intelligence* 59, No. 2: (June 2015).

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fading into the background. Life was easier being unnoticed,” but she soon enjoys the freedom that comes with assuming different roles and covers. “That was the best part: the moment you become someone else. New name, new occupation, new background, education, siblings, lovers, religion—it was easy for me.” Her agency-taught skills, of course, are what enable Irina to hide the secret of her sexual orientation and have a career—both a neat way of subverting the system and giving the book’s title a double meaning.

Prescott does less well with her true historical characters. Her research on Pasternak, Ivinskaya, and the grim atmosphere of the Soviet Union is solid, and she drops real figures from the OSS and the CIA’s early days into the story to give it verisimilitude: Sally, for example, worked with Julia Child on Ceylon during the war, and Frank Wisner and Alan Dulles make a couple of appearances. This works for the Russian characters, with whose experiences and ways of thinking most US readers will be unfamiliar, but not as well for the Americans. The reader starts to get the feeling that Prescott is using real people and well-known tales from CIA’s early days (I first read the one about the snake in Thomas Powers’ *The Man Who Kept the Secrets* [1979]) to show that she’s done her homework rather than use Dulles’s womanizing or Wisner’s breakdown as plot devices.

Still, Prescott’s use of history succeeds in a different way, in evoking an intellectual world that disappeared several decades ago. All of the characters, whether Russian or American, believe deeply in the political power of ideas and literature—Olga goes to the gulag for her belief in literature, Pasternak agonizes about his

inaction during Stalin’s Terror, Teddy is himself a would-be novelist, and even the bland men of the CIA are alert to the possibilities of *Zhivago*—and, therefore, believe deeply in the importance of their work. This is an aspect of the Cold War that in today’s cynical era is overlooked or even disparaged, very much to the detriment of efforts to combat modern threats, whether of extremism or the systematic dissemination of falsehood. Prescott’s point that lies can be refuted by people who believe in the power of truth is one well worth remembering.

Any final evaluation of *The Secrets We Kept* depends on what a particular reader is looking for. Anyone who wants a spy thriller should go elsewhere, as Prescott simply has not written that kind of book. If you are seeking a complex, multilayered novel with more than a few intellectual and philosophical musings, however, *The Secrets We Kept* delivers and will leave you hungry for more—you likely will find yourself wanting to read *The Zhivago Affair*. If you are interested in how women approach and are shifting the espionage genre, moreover, *The Secrets We Kept* is important reading in its own right. Women long have been absent from the front ranks of espionage writers, but the publication of *The Secrets We Kept* and Kate Atkinson’s *Transcription* (2018) suggests this is changing.^a The theme of women using intelligence work to break free of their assigned gender roles is front and center in both Prescott’s and Atkinson’s work, and they also remind us that the history of women in intelligence remains underexplored. If Prescott continues to work in these areas, and other women writers build on her and Atkinson’s examples, the espionage genre will be all the richer for it.



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a. Atkinson’s book was reviewed in *Studies in Intelligence* 62, No. 4 (December 2018).