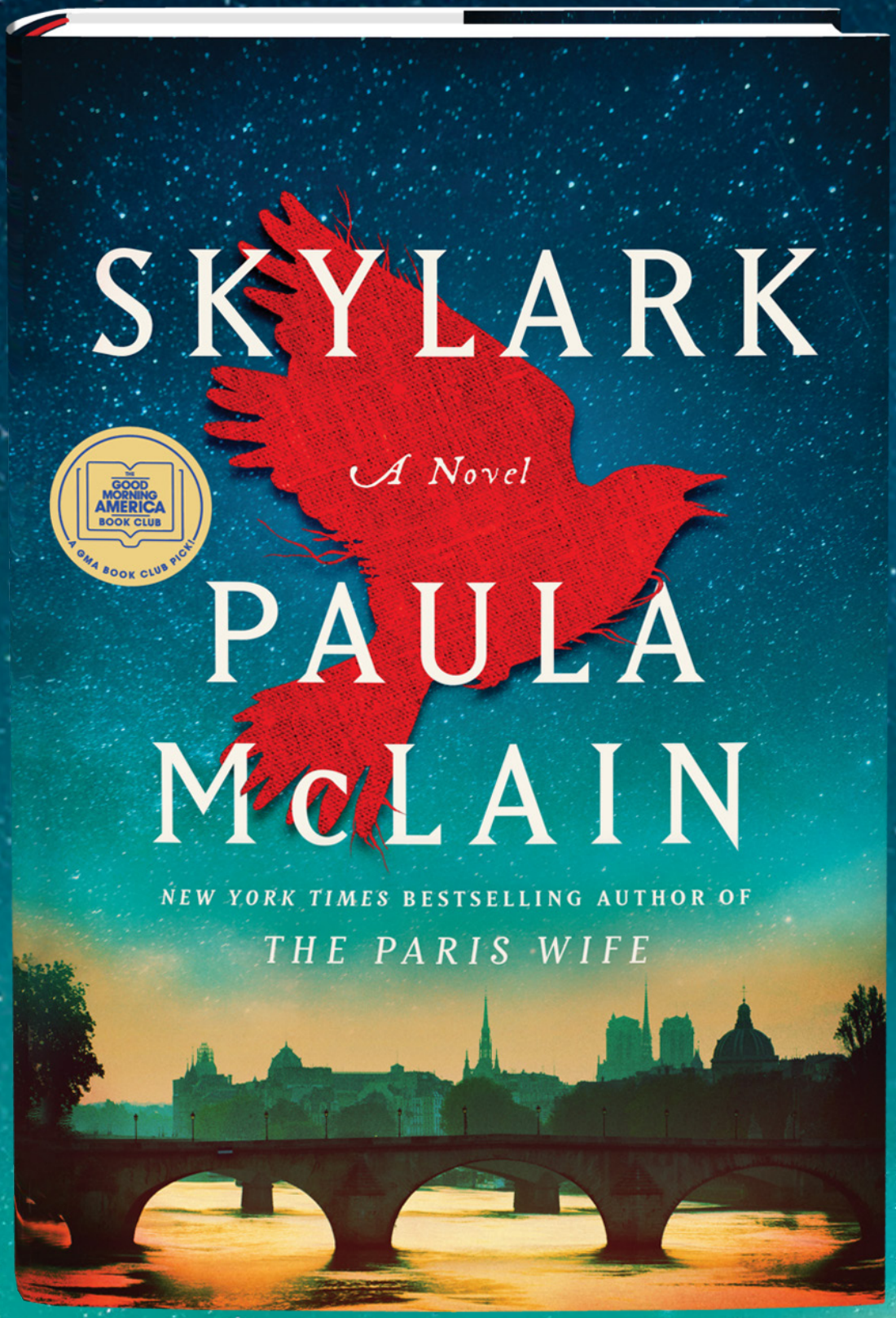
READING GROUP GUIDE



READING GROUP GUIDE

SKYLARK

PAULA MCLAIN

This reading group guide for **SKYLARK** *includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Paula McLain. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

INTRODUCTION

A mesmerizing tale of Paris above and below—where a woman's quest for artistic freedom in 1664 intertwines with a doctor's dangerous mission during the German occupation in the 1940s, revealing a story of courage and resistance that transcends time.

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Skylark* was inspired by the real-life network of tunnels under Paris. Were you at all familiar with these and their history prior to reading the novel? What did you discover that surprised you about the history of Paris while reading *Skylark?*

2. At the start of the novel, Alouette and her father's lives revolve entirely around the world of fabric dye. She says that colors from "legendary crimsons, impossible indigos" to "Tyrian purple" occupy every free space in their lives, and bleed into the occupied ones. What does their obsession reveal about their characters and about the society in which they live? What did you make of the fact that the right to wear certain colors was reserved for people of high social rank? Today, what do we infer about people from the type of colors or clothes they choose to wear?

3. Why do you think Paula McLain decided to interweave dual narratives to create this story? What do Kristof and Sasha's narratives in World War II have in common with the stories of Alouette and the women confined in Salpêtrière in 1664, and vice versa?

4. When Alouette is walking in the orchard at Salpêtrière, she encounters the superioress tending a small, twisted sapling. She tells Alouette, "Everything worth keeping must be tended. Sometimes at all costs." What do you think the superioress is trying to convey to Alouette? Did her actions in the orchard change the way you thought of her?

5. When Alesander shows Kristof the tunnels for the first time, he tells Kristof that his grandfather used to say that every city has an aboveground face and a belowground face that only few remember. Have you ever experienced a city this way? If so, what did the belowground reveal that the above did not?

6. When we first meet Alouette, she feels disdain for the meaning of her name: *Skylark*. As she endures increasing hardship at Salpêtrière, do you think her perception of her name changes? Can you pinpoint any particular moments when she embraces her namesake?

7. Alouette's connection to Etienne sparks just as she prepares to flee from her life in Saint-Marcel. Sasha and Gérard find one another just as anti-Semitisim overtakes Paris. Love seems to find the main characters during particularly tumultuous or perhaps inopportune times. What are some of the challenges of these relationships, and what are some of the benefits?

8. The impact of an individual person's bravery is an important theme throughout the novel. Though none of the characters in *Skylark* are responsible for the circumstances of the world in which they find themselves, they still muster the courage to save themselves, and more importantly, to try to save those around them. Did you understand why characters like Alouette and Alesander were driven to action? What does that say about resistance and why some engage in it while others do not?

9. Paris could be considered its own character in the book, from the descriptions of the Bièvre to the Seine, the rue des Gobelins, and, of course, the tunnels and catacombs. What stood out the most to you about Paris in these time periods? Did anything about the differences and similarities between the 1600s and the 1900s surprise you?

10. The treatment of psychological illness, though it would not have been known as such in Alouette's time, is one of the many threads connecting the two time periods of the book. Discuss the parallels between the horrors at Salpêtrière and the tragic fates of Kristof's patients at the hands of the Nazis. In what ways has our understanding of mental illness changed since the 1940s?

11. At the end of the novel, we learn about the book of colors that Alouette has collected, a catalog of the knowledge she and the women in her community in Brittany possess. How did this resolution of Alouette's identity make you feel? What did it reveal about the multifaceted nature of dyeing and about women's work more generally?

12. While Alouette's story ends definitively, Sasha and Kristof's stories do not. How do you imagine their stories might continue after the end of the book?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. HOME-COOKED POTLUCK—Sasha's mother, Rachel, takes pride in cooking for her family. Rather than opting for customary French cuisine for your book club, consider accenting it with some special family recipes that are unique to you.

2. ART EXERCISE—In chapter 80, Sasha, Kristof, and their group play a game where everyone creates a poem or drawing by contributing one new element without seeing the previous ones. Try this game with your book club to create a poem or an artwork and discuss the results.

3. MAP IT OUT—Find maps of Paris and France and chart Alouette's escape from Salpêtrière to the Marais, and then eventually to Camaret-sur-Mer, Brittany. Then chart Sasha's escape from the rue des Gobelins, into the catacombs at the Parc Montsouris, and finally to Toulouse.

4. Learn what else Paula McLain is up to at PaulaMcLain.com.

A Conversation with Paula McLain

Q. Many of your previous novels have been based on real figures from the past, but the characters in *Skylark* are all your own. How has the process of writing their stories been different than in the past?

A. Writing real people invites a kind of sacred accountability—you're forever in conversation with the historical facts on record, with the immoveable particularities of an actual life. With Alouette, Étienne, Kristof, and Sasha I had a new sense of freedom, and a very different responsibility. I wasn't illuminating what happened; I was discovering what would feel most compelling and most true. I could let the characters surprise me, change their minds, contradict themselves, and carry private weather that no archive could capture. The research was just as rigorous, but invention let me braid it to the pulse of the story rather than to footnotes.

Q. *Skylark* takes place across two time periods—Paris in World War II and in the 1600s. Did you know from the start that these would be the periods explored in this book? Why did you choose them?

A. Very early on I knew I wanted to write a book about the hidden city beneath Paris and the people who turn to that space when the official paths forward collapse. Researching the tunnels drew me to the 13th arrondissement—the old Faubourg Saint-Marcel—where the quarry belt and the buried Bièvre once shaped daily life. From there I fell into the world of the Gobelin dye works, sumptuary restrictions about who could wear which colors, and the crushing poverty of those who produced such beauty. The Bièvre itself—polluted, channeled, still insisting on a path—became both setting and metaphor, which made the 1660s feel inevitable.

On the modern side, I learned about two real medical students who found an entrance to the tunnels beneath Sainte-Anne's hospital during the Occupation. They mapped sections of the network and later turned those maps over to the French Resistance. I didn't retell their story directly—my path with Kristof and Alesander took me somewhere more intimate—but their example confirmed the period. 1942 let me show how, when the surface narrows and power hardens, the underland becomes a conduit for survival and defiance. Placing the book in these two moments let the same city ask the same moral courage across centuries.

Q. Alouette, Etienne, Kristof, and Sasha are remarkably distinct personalities who approach difficult situations in unique ways. Is there one of the four that you see the most of yourself in? Were there any specific real-life inspirations for the four of them?

A. I recognize pieces of myself in all four, but I'm closest to Alouette and Sasha. Alouette's stubborn devotion to making—her belief that color and craft can transfigure even the bleakest circumstances—feels like my own creed. She refuses to let the world decide what is worthy of beauty; she creates beauty anyway. Sasha carries the other half of me: a vivid dreamlife, a love of poetry, and a quiet, durable hope that refuses to go out, even when the lights are being systematically dimmed.

None of these characters are modeled on a single person. They're mosaics built from diaries and testimonies of young people under occupation, hospital histories, guild records, quarry accounts, and the small acts of courage I've witnessed in ordinary lives. If Alouette and Sasha anchor the book, it's because they practice two survival arts I believe in deeply—making and the power of the imagination.

Q. As the book unfolds, the connections between these various characters across time start to become more apparent. Did you discover the various threads tying them together while you were writing the book, or did you know them when you started?

A. From the beginning I knew I wanted the stories to connect in unexpected ways—not tidily, and certainly not contrived—but mysteriously, soulfully. I set a few anchors—the tunnels, a carved skylark, the Bièvre—and then wrote toward the negative space between them. I was after resonance rather than puzzle-solving: echoes that arrive slantwise, images and gestures that migrate across centuries, a line of courage humming beneath both plots. As drafts deepened, new correspondences surfaced and surprised me. My job wasn't to tie everything in a bow, but to clear the path so the reader could feel the pull without seeing the strings.

Q. *Skylark* features references to an impressive array of literature from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to the writings of Carl Jung and Rilke. Talk about the research required for this book, and how did you decide what to include?

A. Rilke has been a touchstone for me since I was a young writer—his insistence on "living the questions" sat on my desk while I drafted the WWII chapters. Jung has the same gravitational pull; I've long been fascinated by the psyche and depth psychology, and his language for shadow, dreams, and individuation helped me understand Kristof's inner life. Ovid was a more surprising shimmer. I first tried to work in Orpheus and Eurydice and then realized that the myths Sasha loves—descent and return, metamorphosis, the cost of looking back—were already illuminating what my characters grapple with.

On the nuts-and-bolts side, I never really know, when I go down a research rabbit hole, what will thrust its way into the book. It's a mysterious part of the job—and one of my favorites. But there's also an intuitive click when I find a gem: what it took to make a 17th-century scarlet; or learning that, in July 1942, some Parisian teenagers were released into the streets with no family or home to return to. Those details carry their own voltage. If they light up character and theme, they stay.

Q. In your Author's Note you speak to your inspirations for including the Parisian catacombs in *Skylark*. When did you first learn about the tunnel system under the city, and when did you start to connect it to the themes of survival and rebellion you mention?

A. I can trace it to hearing Robert Macfarlane on a podcast talking about *Underland* one morning when I was walking my dog. His language for "deep time" startled me into seeing Paris differently—not as a single city, but as a double: the surface we all know, and a shadow city below. Learning that miles of quarries, ossuaries, and culverted rivers thread beneath the streets cracked something open. I fell into full-on obsession—reading maps and diaries, walking the 13th arrondissement above ground, talking with people who know those spaces, and eventually going below with a guide.

What gripped me most were the marks the underground keeps: initials and dates, tally marks, arrows, scraps of verse, rough birds and prayers—signs left by prisoners on the run, rebels, insurgents, explorers, and workers. Those traces felt like a chorus about endurance and defiance. Underground, rank falls away; what matters is who risks a light, who points the way. That's when I knew the tunnels weren't just a setting for *Skylark*—they were a moral landscape, the place where survival and rebellion touch.

Q. *Skylark* opens not in the 17th-century or 1942, but in 2019 with the Notre-Dame fire—centuries after Alouette's story and nearly eight decades after Kristof's. Why begin so far in the future, and what did that frame let you explore?

A. Because sometimes ruin reveals what ordinary time hides. Watching the blaze felt like seeing a sudden cross-section of a living body—the bones of a cathedral visible, and with them the human labor inside the stone. Notre-Dame, like Paris itself, was built by thousands of mostly invisible hands: quarrymen and masons, roofers and scaffolders. Without those ordinary people, nothing stands. Opening in 2019 let me use catastrophe not as spectacle but as a lens: it echoes the book's understructures—the tunnels and quarries, the buried Bièvre, the quiet line of devotion and determination that outlasts regimes. In the aftermath, something small and improbable surfaces—a shard of blue that carries forward the work Alouette began. The image signals that even when the visible world is damaged, meaning can endure—and sometimes more: the labor and love of those who built it, stone by stone.

Q. What made you decide to return to Paris, the setting of your mega-bestseller *The Paris Wife?* What keeps drawing you back? Is there something Paris makes possible for you on the page that another place might not?

A. Hadley Hemingway once said Ernest had more sides than any geometry book could chart, and I feel the same about Paris. *The Paris Wife* lived aboveground—in cafés and salons, in the glitter and ache of the 1920s. *Skylark* descends. It's the same city but seen through its other planes: the Gobelin dye works and Salpêtrière, Sainte-Anne, the abandoned Petite Ceinture, and the buried Bièvre. I didn't come back because of nostalgia, but because the layeredness of Paris continues to lure and inspire me. The city is prismatic—turn it a degree and a new color appears.

Q. By the end of the book, Alouette has dedicated her life to something she never expected prior to her imprisonment in Salpêtrière: preserving her father's legacy of color for herself and others. Furthermore, after her courageous escape, she meets a tragic end. Why did you decide to end the book this way? Were there any alternative endings you envisioned at an earlier stage?

A. I tried on happier endings—ones where Alouette makes it to safety or disappears into a new life. They felt untrue to the world of the novel and to history's ledger of unnamed women. Alouette isn't a martyr; she's a maker. I also wanted her to have a brief span of real life after the escape—breath, love, choice—so the loss reads as a human life interrupted, not a narrative device. Her decision to safeguard knowledge—color as agency, dignity, inheritance—is a radical act of care and defiance. The wartime strand bears witness to that legacy: the signal she leaves helps strangers survive. And the book's bookends—the prologue and epilogue—let us see how her vision, though not fully realized in her lifetime, ripples forward in astonishing ways: the craft she guarded, the freedom she sought tirelessly, the blue she reached for, all reappearing in unexpected hands and centuries. Her death is heartbreaking, but the life she ignites endures. The skylark remains, carrying her courage forward—quiet proof that love's work outlives us.