

FIONA MCINTOSH

The

SPY'S WIFE

BOOK CLUB HANDBOOK

Everything your book club needs to host
a discussion about *The Spy's Wife!*





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Fiona McIntosh is an internationally bestselling author of novels for adults and children. She co-founded an award-winning travel magazine with her husband, which they ran for fifteen years while raising their twin sons before she became a full-time author. Fiona roams the world researching and drawing inspiration for her novels, and runs a series of highly respected fiction masterclasses. She calls South Australia home.

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BOOK CLUB NOTES

Start a lively discussion at your book club with these thought provoking questions as a guide

1. Evie is a stationmaster's daughter but what attributes does she possess that can be leveraged to make her a spy?
2. Evie makes a number of very bold moves throughout the course of this story. Which act in particular did you think was the boldest of all?
3. Did you think Evie was a brave character or a foolhardy one?
4. Evie tells Max, 'Everything about you is a secret.' Were there any aspects of his life about which he was being true?
5. 'Now that I'm in love, I don't know how to be out of love with you.' Can you appreciate Evie's predicament, or should rational thought override emotion in such a scenario?
6. Evie describes her love for Max as intense and frightening. Is this ever a good thing?
7. Do you think Evie is convincing in her role as the good wife of the German engineer?
8. Evie learns the first lesson in spying: 'Don't share information when you don't have to.' What other important lessons does she learn about espionage in a time of war?
9. Evie and Max are told that 'no problem's too great when there is love'. Do you agree?
10. Did you sympathise with Max's motives in becoming a spy for the Germans? Is there anything you would not do for your own child?
11. Evie believed that Max withheld the truth from her for all the right reasons. Is there ever a good reason to do so?
12. The novel features some stunning picturesque locations. Which have been your favourite settings in this book and other novels by Fiona McIntosh?



Q&A WITH FIONA

Where did you get the inspiration for the story and characters?

I was keen to write a ‘fish out of water’ type tale, where a woman finds herself in a role she should never have been asked to do. Wartime made invisible heroes of lots of women, who went about duties they were traditionally not considered suitable for – from making weapons to becoming spies. It was when I visited North Yorkshire and the sleepy railway station of Levensham that a story began to form about a woman who was, through circumstances, doing plenty of work normally reserved for men in order to help her father run the railway station. And then I visited one of the Yorkshire air bases from WWII and the kernel of an idea began to sprout along the lines of a German spy in Britain. One idea led to another, and suddenly I was writing the novel!

We’ve heard you usually travel to the settings featured in your books for research. Did you have the opportunity to research the locations in person for *The Spy’s Wife*?

Yes. I was extremely fortunate that in 2019, while working on *The Diamond Hunter*, I’d been in the north of England roaming for locations and I’d

visited Levensham. At the start of 2020, knowing what I wanted to write about, I travelled back to England – Yorkshire and London – and then on to Germany to find my cities, settling on Berlin and then mainly Munich for all the action scenes. Bavaria’s countryside appealed and Munich being Hitler’s favourite playground really lent itself to the story. COVID was just filtering through as problematic – we’d got the news while in Germany that Milan was closing down, and that essentially sent the world into its tailspin ... I hurried home and returned to Adelaide almost within hours of Australia closing its borders in March 2020. I was so very lucky to have gathered the material I had and to get home.

What was the most interesting thing you discovered about this period of history?

I suppose I’d learned it previously, but it was only when I was in Germany in 2020, studying the early 1930s from the German perspective, that I began to fully understand how impoverished this once great nation had become. I was staggered to learn that rather than buying firewood, they were burning Reichsmark to keep warm because

the money was worthless. I developed a much greater comprehension of the atmosphere of Germany and the mindset of the German people, beggared and humiliated after WWI, and how it became possible for a man as Machiavellian as Hitler to emerge and say what the Germans wanted to hear. I know I’ve always been baffled as to how Hitler could coerce a nation into proceeding as it did, but you have to see it from a different vantage, understand all the nuance, all the grasping and opportunistic people behind him as well, to get a better picture of how a liberally minded nation became hoodwinked at first and then determined to win at all costs.

Was there a scene or character that was particularly fun or challenging to write?

Yes, definitely. It’s one of the major scenes where Evie takes on a group of chauvinistic men and outwits them using her cunning and intelligence. It happens in London and I had no idea how I was going to make it work when I began writing it, but it was fun to watch her, knowing she was relying entirely on instinct and no training to achieve what she needed. She wrote that scene – not me! ☺

You’re an avid baker. What recipe would you suggest to pair perfectly with *The Spy’s Wife*?

Oh, there’s only one possible recipe – cherry cake! Highly popular and familiar on every English station’s kiosk menu in the previous century. I love its old-fashioned look, using a traditional recipe of a rich, buttery sponge with a hum of almond flavouring and glacé cherries. Except I’d prefer a slightly modernised version that introduces ground almonds, vanilla, natural glacé cherries and toasted almonds on top.

What’s next for you?

Already finished! This is the 2022 novel, which we’re currently calling *The Orphans*. This is my first all-Aussie book. It has been quite a challenge to research and write during COVID lockdowns, and so it is set entirely in South Australia, my home state. And now it’s time to knuckle down and write the fourth in the DCI Jack Hawksworth series. That’s my new project for the new year.



EVIE'S CHERRY CAKE

Perfect at any time of the day but particularly with a hot cup of tea. I tweaked the line-up of ingredients from another highly dependable recipe by the goddess herself, Nigella Lawson. It was one of the first fruit cakes I ever baked. Until this one, I was not drawn to old style fruit cakes and, to be honest, I'm still not a big fan of the traditional, richly dark, packed-with-fruit cake. I do enjoy making them though. This one is a beauty though and I defy anyone to not to enjoy a small slab with a cuppa.

Nigella explains in *How To Be A Domestic Goddess* cookbook that her family called this 'station cake' when she was growing up and I understand why. Having stood on many a breezy platform waiting for my train in England, I can confirm that no station kiosk worth its salt would not have some form of this fruit cake under a glass bell on the counter down the decades, or these days already pre-sliced and wrapped. It might have had other fruit such as sultanas involved but the glacé cherry was the key component.

I've adapted it slightly, adding almonds, and in the past I've even used magnificent crystallised but naked black cherries, sour cherries and I've made it festive using those awful traffic-light-green cherries with the red.

You choose your preferred cherries but they must be preserved in sugar, rather than fresh or canned.

x Fiona

INGREDIENTS

200g glacé cherries – go for best quality and natural coloured	Almond essence
250g self raising flour	120g ground almonds
230g unsalted butter, room temp	Full cream milk – about half a dozen tablespoons
180g caster sugar	Small pack of almond slivers
3 extra large eggs	

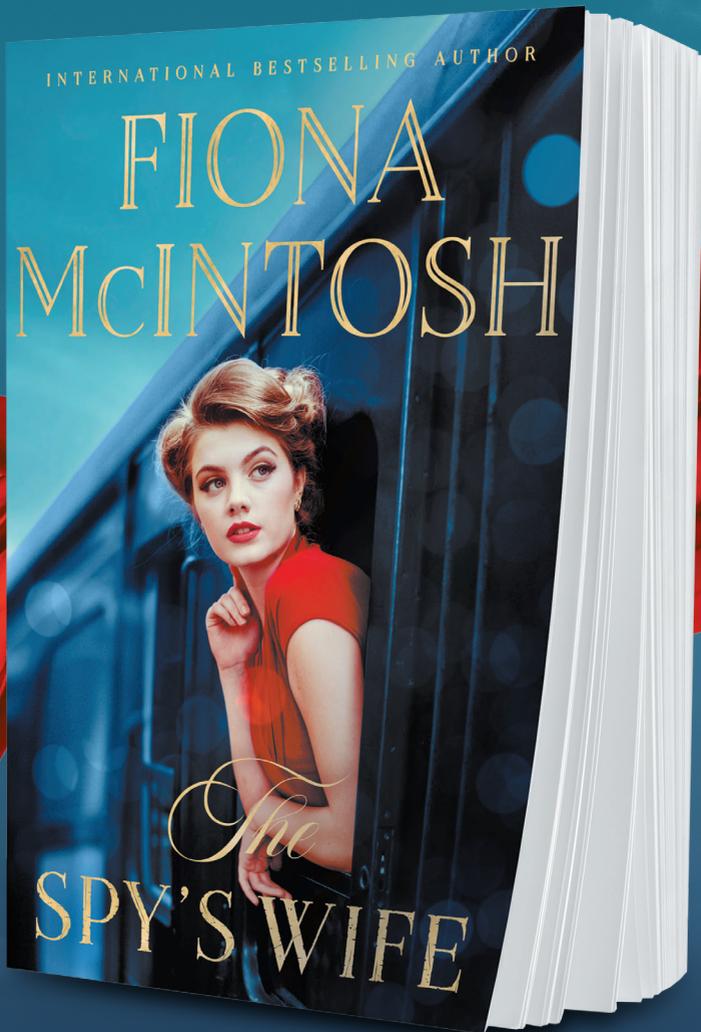
METHOD

1. Butter and line a standard cake loaf tin. Preheat oven to 170°C.
2. Mix flour and almond meal with a ballon whisk to combine. You can even sieve.
3. Wash your cherries if they're sticky with syrup. Pat dry. Halve and dust with some flour. Shake off the excess to leave them coated. This will help distribution of the fruit and prevent them from sinking.
4. Cream butter and sugar until it reaches that light and fluffy stage.
5. Beat eggs briefly so you can add them slowly, beating well between each addition.
6. Beat in the almond essence to taste. I use far more than I should. So work with about four drops.
7. I still like to fold in my flour the old way by hand, and even with a metal spoon as we were taught. In this instance you are folding in the flour and ground almonds. Be gentle and don't overmix because you're about to add cherries that need mixing in too.
8. Add the cherries, folding in lightly with the milk to ease the mix in. Stay gentle.
9. Into the tin you go with the cake mixture. Level the top.
10. Scatter generously with almond slivers. Slivers are my preference as they survive the bake to go toasty without burning as almond flakes might. But if flakes are all you have, they will work too – just keep an eye on the top of the cake and lay a small sheet of foil over the top towards the end of the bake if those flakes are browning too much.
11. Start checking from about 50 mins. In my oven I bake for just over an hour.

Test for readiness with a skewer and if it comes out clean, remove from the oven, leave in the tin on a wire rack to cool for at least 15 mins. Then turn out and leave on the wire rack to cool completely.

Leave overnight or all day before slicing ... knowing, once you begin, the gorging doesn't stop.

(The gentle motion of hand folding in dry ingredients will lead to a better bake. Have you all seen *Schitt's Creek*? 'Just fold it in, David.' Funny scene that most fans recall with glee.)



A love that will change
the course of war.