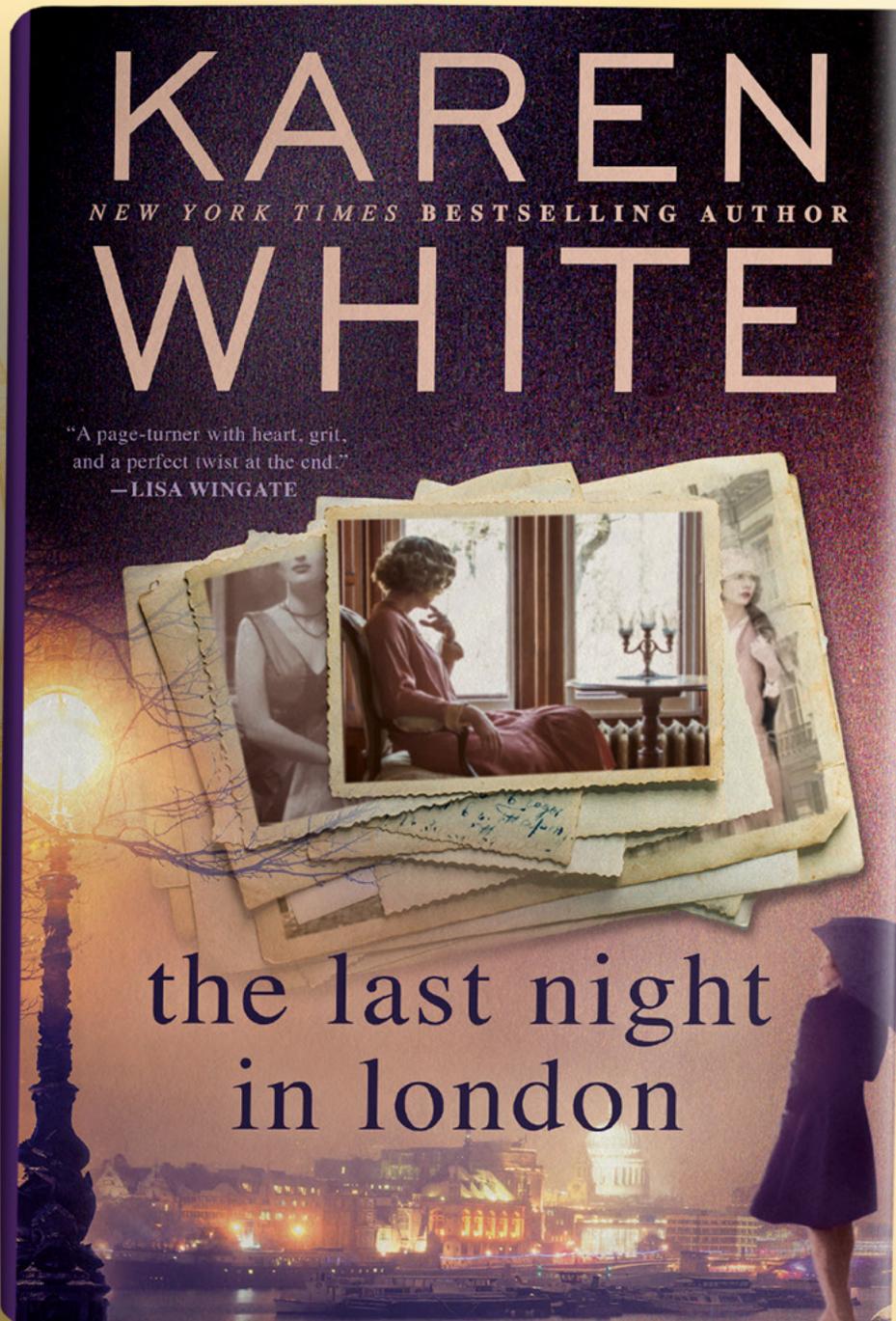


Book Club Kit



KAREN
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
WHITE

"A page-turner with heart, grit,
and a perfect twist at the end."
—LISA WINGATE

the last night
in london

B
BERKLEY

A conversation with
**KAREN
WHITE**

You've lived all over the world, not just London. Tell us about that, and how it has influenced your writing.

Living in different countries allowed me a view of my own country and countrymen from the perspective of an outsider looking in. I saw things that I would probably have taken for granted if I lived in the United States and always knew what it was like to shop at a mall, eat at a drive-thru, or go to a supermarket—or know how to drive. Driving has always been an American teenager rite of passage, but when I was a teenager and lived in London, the driving age was 18 and we didn't own a car. I didn't get my driver's license until I was 21.

More than that, though, is the sense of world history that I might not have grasped living in the relatively “young” USA. There's something very grounding and momentous about touching one of the rocks at Stonehenge (when tourists were allowed to get up close and personal), or standing in the bedroom where William Shakespeare once slept.

Living in my London flat in Harley House (which, incidentally, was across the street from the spot where Charles Dickens wrote



David Copperfield), I learned that many of the windows had been shattered during the Blitz. This left me with the lasting impression of history as a living thing, and how the past is always present. I would be forever inspired to learn more about the history of each place I lived and visited, and then, later, to write about it.

The close friendship between Precious and Eva was inspired by a best friend you made as a teenager in London. Do you two stay in touch?



*Queen Mary's Gardens (above)
and Regent's Park (below)*



I met my best friend, Claire White Kobylt, when we were both sixteen and juniors in high school. She'd moved to London for her father's job mid-semester and was inserted in my chemistry class. My lab partner was absent that day and Claire was assigned to be my lab partner for the day. We were in the middle of doing an experiment (distilling wood, I think) and because I hadn't been listening got halfway through and couldn't remember what we were supposed to do next. I had Claire stick her hand into a deep tube of liquid to stop the flow while I asked the teacher. Always being a chatty type, it was twenty minutes before I returned—without the teacher because I'd forgotten what I was supposed to be doing. Meanwhile, Claire had figured it out on her own and all was well. She didn't get mad and we were best friends from that point on.

We have a lot in common, but whereas she's very calm, I can be very dramatic and excitable. We fit together nicely, complimenting each other's personalities, which makes for a lasting friendship. This is the way I saw the friendship between Precious and Eva.

Unfortunately for them, a war intervened, changing their friendship in unexpected ways. Claire and I are still best friends—she was my maid of honor at my wedding (I was her matron of honor) and we are godmothers to each other's children. I also married her brother, which makes it even easier to stay in touch since we're now family.

What about the Blitz captured your interest and made you want to revisit this time?

The historical facts, photographs, and film footage of the Blitz is as captivating as it is horrifying. Nine months of almost nightly bombing, including fifty-seven consecutive nights of air raids resulting in nearly 43,000 civilian deaths and over 139,000 wounded. Yet they would not give up. They “kept calm and carried on” as ordered by their fearless leader Winston Churchill. They got up, swept up the mess, and went back to work. What remarkable grit, resilience, and bravery. I wanted to write a book about these survivors, to delve a little deeper into their world and tell a little piece of their story.

Were any of your characters inspired by real people?

The character of Precious Dubose is very loosely inspired by the great-aunt of a friend of mine. Precious Williams was blond, beautiful, and Southern—as well as a fashion model like my fictional Precious. However, they were from separate eras, and the only thing I borrowed from the real Precious was the story of how she acquired her name.

This book is being released, like so many others, in the midst of a global pandemic. How has that impacted your publishing experience?

The main thing has been learning how to rearrange my office for the best Zoom backdrop! And also learning how extraneous shoes are. I’ve done most (if not all) of my events so far either barefoot or wearing flip-flops.

On a more practical side, I now know where the camera is on my laptop and that I should look directly at it while in virtual events, and also where the mute and hide camera buttons are for obvious reasons. More importantly, I’ve had to learn ways to engage my audience in a virtual world where everything is now visual. For this reason I’ve learned PowerPoint to create exciting slideshows to accompany my presentations and hopefully make the event less static and an exciting substitution for being in person.

Which do you prefer—the historical research that goes into each book, or the writing?

I’m one of those writers who loves having written over the actual writing process so this is an easy one for me. As a self-admitted history nerd, there is little I enjoy more than the delving into a period of history and learning more than just dates and places, but the day-to-day existence of the people who experienced it firsthand.

What inspired you to write this novel?

Many things, but mostly the piles of reader mail asking me to tell Maddie Warner’s story.

In *Falling Home* Maddie is fourteen, and in *After the Rain* she's eighteen. She's had a lot of life-changing events in those two books, and readers wanted to know what happened next. I've also wanted to tell a story of an American expatriate living in London. I lived in London for seven years when growing up in an incredible Edwardian building built in 1904 that had been a witness to so much history. Being the creative sort, I spent a lot of time trying to imagine the lives of the people who'd once inhabited my home. Once I became a writer, I knew it was only a matter of time before I would return to Harley House and tell one of those stories.

What research was required?

I did a lot of reading of firsthand accounts of people who lived in London during the war, as well as books about the period (highly recommend *Last Hope Island* by Lynne Olson). I was also able to find a lot of news footage that showed the bombing as well as interviews with survivors. I enjoyed the research so much that I might still be researching if I hadn't had a deadline.

For Maddie's story, I will admit that I had to go back and reread *Falling Home* and *After the Rain* to make sure I remembered all the details of her life in Walton, Georgia (because if I got that wrong, there are plenty of readers out there with better memories who would remind me!).

What do you want readers to take away from this book?

Primarily, I would love for readers to have a new awareness of the sacrifices and bravery of ordinary people who would not surrender even during a time of great strife. They were truly "all in this together." They, in essence, saved the world. In today's world of instant gratification and "me first," I think it's an important reminder. I also wanted to tell a story of unremembered acts of kindness and love; of all the brave people and heroic events who never made it into the history books.



Harley House across the years



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did you think of the ultimate sacrifices both Eva and Precious made? Would you have lived a life the way they did?
2. Both Eva and Precious try to change their lives by moving to London—Eva also tries to change her name and her whole identity. Why do you think they chose to reinvent themselves? Was it the time period? Their station in life? Or their hope for their future?
3. Eva and Precious have to make very difficult decisions in the book—decisions that betray the dearest person to each of their hearts. Did you sympathize with them about the decisions they made? Or do you think they could have had made different choices?
4. Maddie has a hard time facing the truth. Do you think she addressed her dilemma in a way that others would have? What words of encouragement would you have given her?
5. What is it about war that causes us to reflect on the human condition? Especially World War II?
6. Why do you think Precious wanted the truth to finally be told? After all those years, why did she want the secret to no longer be one?
7. For most of her life Eva lived a lie. Who do you think Eva hurt most by living this lie? Or do you think she hurt anyone at all? Did she even hurt herself?
8. Maddie has to deal with the possibility of dying young from cancer like her mother and doesn't want to have any serious relationships because of her fear. Do you agree with her choices?
9. The things that separated Eva from Graham were very hard to bridge, especially in England before World War II: money, social class, education, family background. Do you think their relationship would still have survived if Eva had told Graham the truth about her real identity?
10. Do you think Colin's response to Maddie's fears is adequate? Do you believe that he is sincere about his promises to her?