

THE NEXT SHIP HOME Reading Group Guide

1. Discuss Francesca's reasons for leaving Italy. What circumstances would cause you to leave your home?
2. Francesca is warned that some immigrant women have been funneled into workhouses or servitude by scam artists. How does the immigration process make people more vulnerable? What protections would you suggest to prevent these types of exploitation?
3. Describe Alma's mother Johanna. How does her own security compete with her children's needs? Do you think she could have stood up to Robert more?
4. Francesca and Maria are first denied entry to the U.S. because they have no male relatives to meet them and no employment arranged. What was the reasoning behind these limiting policies? How do they compare to modern immigration requirements?
5. Alma's first instinct is to report all types of corruption she sees—from the vendor giving incorrect change, to matrons resorting to physical violence. Still, her coworkers repeatedly convince her not to say anything. What persuaded her to keep quiet? Would you have done something different in her place?
6. As she confesses her sins, Francesca hopes that her God would understand her intentions. At the time of each "sin," she felt she was making the only choice available to her. Do you think she acted immorally throughout the book? Why or why not?
7. Most of the Ellis Island staff disdains Commissioner Williams when he takes charge. Did he deserve their distrust? How do the opinions of her coworkers shape Alma's interactions with the commissioner?
8. Francesca agrees to help her coworker Janie find the rat in her bedroom, knowing that it might curb some of Janie's cruel behavior. Would you have helped Janie? Are there circumstances where helping others—or making yourself indispensable to them—is not a worthwhile strategy?
9. Alma is appalled to discover that her coworkers were already aware of John Lambert's mistreatment of immigrant women. How did his position and the criminalization of sex work protect him from consequences? Do you think the coworkers that turned a blind eye share responsibility for his crimes?
10. How does fear of the unknown dominate immigration policy, both in the past and the present?

A Conversation with the Author

What first drew you towards writing and historical fiction in particular?

I had a dream about Josephine Bonaparte! She took me on a tour of a chateau every night for a week, and finally, I decided this was a very strange occurrence and picked up a biography about her, to learn a little more about her life. I read half of that biography and knew—almost like a lightning bolt—that I had to write a book about her. It was the strangest thing! When I told my husband I was going to write a novel, he looked at me like I was from another planet. I'd never talked about writing a book before that moment. When I look back at my life, however, I have since realized I was always a writer. I won essay contests in high school, was the copy editor of my high school and college papers, and I carried books

around with me as if they were a lifeline. I loved everything about poetry and classic novels and, of course, history. One of my favorite places to spend time still to this day is at museums or historical sites.

Where do you start a new project? Do your characters, plot, or setting come first?

It really depends on the book. If the book focuses on a particular event in history, I start with plot and setting, and develop a fictional character that would be the most challenged within the context of that story. If I'm writing biographical fiction (like *Becoming Josephine, Rodin's Lover*, and my up and coming work on Frank Sinatra and Ava Gardner), I begin with the character and really delve into the details of their lives and expand into different themes from there. As for setting, I like to think of it as a character as well, and really enjoy digging into that aspect of writing.

Did your ancestors travel through Ellis Island, and if so, did any of their experiences appear in the book?

My ancestors came before Ellis Island, actually. On my dad's side, I have relatives that date back to the early 1600s, and on my mother's, the mid-1800s. I did give my grandmother a nod in the book, whose family was from Sicily originally, by naming a character after her. My grandmother, Alberta, is quite the devout Catholic so it was fun for me (and her) to have a benevolent and caring nun named after her.

Your research drew from newspaper archives, the Oral History Project, and many other books. How did you handle gaps in the historical record?

Gaps in the record is where a historical author has fun! Both of my main characters in *The Next Ship Home* are fictional, so you won't find them on the record. The story and the setting through which they move, however, is inspired by facts about the operations at Ellis Island as well as the history of the labor movement, anarchism, the tenement culture, and the beginnings of the Subway in 1902 New York City. The gaps give me wiggle room to write dialogue, or what I call, putting words into the characters' mouths. It gives me room to create tension and tone and mood as well, and to add dramatic elements that give the story more complexity.

Alma's engagement and Francesca's pregnancy both highlight the vulnerabilities of women in the early 20th century. What is the most challenging part of writing independent-minded characters within such rigid social structures?

I have to admit, this is one reason why I enjoy writing alternating points of view with male characters. The men had so much freedom! I don't have to construct reasons why they don't have chaperones or why they're wearing a hat and slacks, or why their manners are less than perfect. On the other hand, those restrictions create challenges for my female characters on the page, and finding ways they may overcome them is part of the fun of the craft. It's incredible to research a woman who has defied conventions, ultimately paving the way for women today. It feels as if I'm doing a small justice by giving her much-deserved time in the limelight. Many of the challenges that Francesca faces are still issues for immigrants around the globe. What do you hope readers will learn about immigration from *The Next Ship Home*?

I hope readers may see not only the abuse that took place during that time at Ellis Island, and the power differential between immigration official and immigrant, but also that the issue of immigration

isn't cut and dry. The laws governing immigration were, and are still, continuously shifting—and I hope my readers were able to get a feel for how difficult and complex the issues surrounding immigration can be.