

READERS GUIDE

THE
Secret
OF
Clouds

ALYSON RICHMAN

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1. Maggie and Yuri's teacher-student relationship is the heart of *The Secret of Clouds*. Do you have a teacher who left a lasting impression on you or made a permanent impact on your life?
2. How do music and dance serve as different forms of language for the characters in *The Secret of Clouds*? Think about how music is embraced in Maggie's home and how it ultimately draws her to Daniel. How is it different from Katya's family's attitude toward her dancing? Does the fact that Katya is a ballet dancer influence her romance with Sasha?
3. How do the Topper and Krasny households communicate through food? What are the cultural differences? What are the similarities? Does food play a role in your family's traditions and holidays?
4. Maggie's mother tells her, "We can't be so afraid of experiencing pain that it interferes with the things we love." What are the different painful obstacles that the characters face, and how do they overcome them?
5. There are several references to butterflies in the novel. Why do certain characters identify with butterflies? Sasha also describes the butterfly effect to Katya early on in their relationship. Can you think of an example in your life where one individual meeting changed your destiny?

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6. Do you believe Yuri's heart defect was caused by the Chernobyl accident or was just a random case of bad luck? Does the author imply there were certain things that increased Katya's risk of having a child with a birth defect?

7. How do Katya and Sasha approach Yuri's diagnosis differently? How do their experiences as parents differ? How does each of them deal with the strain and fear of having a sick child?

8. How does Sasha's faith transform over time? How is the conflict between science and faith explored in the novel? How do Sasha and Katya's beliefs differ on this issue?

9. What role do sports play in *The Secret of Clouds*, and how do they unite the various characters in the novel? What makes baseball such an attractive sport for Sasha and Yuri?

10. Both Florence and Katya have family stories that they don't share readily with others, yet these histories impact how they are perceived by others. Did you have greater sympathy for these characters once you learned about their past experiences? Do you know people in your life whom you saw differently and more empathetically once you learned something they don't often reveal to others?

11. Do you think there are individuals who are destined to become teachers because of certain qualities that they possess? What traits do you think contribute to making some people more suitable than others for the profession? Is teaching a calling? Have you been drawn to a certain profession? What made you a perfect fit for that job?

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*Interview with
Alyson Richman*

1. In the past you've always written historical novels. What inspired you to write a more contemporary story? What themes did you know you wanted to explore?

The Secret of Clouds is indeed my first contemporary novel, but I didn't consciously set out to write a more modern-day story. Instead, the material actually found me. Just like with my earlier novels, the book was inspired by a true-life story that haunted me and that I couldn't shake from my mind. A dear friend of mine who is an elementary school teacher told me about a letter she had kept for several years as part of an old class assignment. The letter, which was written by a sick child who later tragically died, was inadvertently mailed back to the boy's parents before my friend had had a chance to alert them that it was on its way. I felt that so much of that story warranted further exploration: the dedication and passion of an educator, the unique relationship between a teacher and a bright and curious yet physically weakened and isolated child, and the unforeseen comfort that a piece of paper—written in the since-departed child's hand—would later bring to all who had known him.

Because all my prior novels did weave in a historical theme, I

again wanted to create a backstory of a part of history that I felt needed to be explored more in contemporary literature. When my son was an infant, his first babysitter was a former nurse from Ukraine who shared with me her stories of the accident at the Chernobyl nuclear plant near her hometown. I would never forget her describing how, for three days, no one knew about the accident, so they were all outside sunning themselves in the unseasonably hot weather and bathing in the unusually warm waters of the local river. Babies were soon born with rare cancers and heart defects akin to what my character Yuri had. Countless health problems related to the radiation leak still plague the Ukrainian population. I wanted to illuminate this trauma in my novel, and fusing these two stories of the letter and of Chernobyl was the perfect way for me to accomplish exploring the themes that were important to me.

2. You've always done a lot of research for your historical novels. Did you need to do the same amount for this novel? How was it different from and similar to the research you've done for your other books?

Because much of the book takes place in Long Island, where I grew up, there was a lot more “local” research than in my previous novels, so I didn’t do as much traveling, which was actually very nice for me. I spent a lot of time interviewing teachers and listening to their stories about what had inspired them to become educators and the special bonds they had created with their students over the years. I also learned about how they themselves had transformed over the years, both as educators and as people, through the relationships they’d shared with their students.

3. Did you have a particular teacher who inspired you? Maggie feels a calling to be a teacher. Have you always felt a calling to be a writer?

My sixth-grade English teacher, Mr. Swink, was definitely the first teacher who treated me as though he knew I'd be an author one day. I will never forget him, and it's one of my deepest regrets that he died at such a young age and didn't learn that my lifelong friend and fellow classmate Jardine Libaire and I both became writers.

I think I always wanted to paint and write. So many of my early professional dreams were to be a children's book author and to illustrate my own stories. Years later, when I found myself majoring in art history in college, I realized that I loved writing stories about artists and exploring the psychological, historical, and cultural questions that art can inspire.

4. Are their certain characters based on real people? Who?

The character of Maggie's mother was inspired by the mother of my friend who shared her story about the lost letter with me. Her mother, Josephine, is the kindest, sweetest woman and an amazing Italian cook. She always has something cooking on her stove and is always gifting a lasagna, a tray of cookies, or something warm to the people she loves or neighbors in need of some comfort. I've included her famous lasagna recipe at the end of the book for those book clubs or readers who want to re-create some of her cooking.

5. Did you know a lot about baseball before you wrote the novel?

Before I had my son, I knew absolutely nothing about baseball. But ever since he was five years old, he has been a huge fan of the sport,

and he also plays both on his school team and in a travel league. Like Yuri, my son gravitated toward the game not only because he enjoyed playing it but also because of the complex mental strategies behind it. When writing *The Secret of Clouds*, I interviewed men of all ages on why they loved baseball. It was really interesting for me to learn what made this sport so special to them, as it inspires such devotion and passion—and a wonderful sense of nostalgia—in its fans. But it can be a very long game, and I used to complain to my son that, when one of his doubleheaders took five or six hours, I could have flown to Paris by the time his games had finished! But after researching the novel, I found I had a new respect for baseball.

6. I love that both Katya's and Maggie's fathers are artists. Why did you choose those specific professions for them?

That's a great question. For those readers who are new to my work, this is a universal theme in all my novels. Because I grew up in an artistic home—with my mother being an abstract painter—I, too, dreamed of following in her footsteps. I've always channeled my love of exploring the creative process in my novels. In the past, I've written books about a mask carver, a painter, an actor, and a musician, but I had yet to write a novel about a violin maker or a ballet dancer. I love learning through my research, so it was wonderful to interview dancers who grew up during the Soviet regime and hear about their deep appreciation for how they utilized their artistic talents to try to overcome the bleakness of Communist life. The same was the case about learning about the craft of violin making. The baseball aspect of *The Secret of Clouds* came about because of my son's love of the game, and the violin part came from my husband's and daughter's love. Both of them are violinists, and my daughter takes lessons at a

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beautiful store in my town where there is an in-house luthier in the back. It was such a treat for me to see the behind-the-scenes work that goes into making violins, and I wanted to find a way to thread that into my novel.