

Mr. Churchill's Secretary Discussion Questions

by Susan Elia MacNeal

Author Bio: (Lit Lovers & Fantastic Fiction)

Susan Elia MacNeal is an American writer and editor. She was raised in Buffalo, NY, and lives with her husband and two children in Brooklyn, New York.

Mr. Churchill's Secretary won the 2013 Barry Award for Best Paperback. The second book, Princess Elizabeth's Spy, was an Oprah Pick of the Week and won the Booky Award by BookGateway.com.

Susan's other writings have appeared in the Wall Street Journal, Huffington Post, Fordor's, Time Out New York, Time Out London, Publishers Weekly, and Dance Magazine. She has also written for various publications of the New York City Ballet and is the author of two nonfiction books.

Characters:

- **Maggie Hope** - Born in London. Raised in the US, in Massachusetts, by her aunt who is a science professor. Parents killed in automobile accident when Maggie was an infant. Inherits a house in London from her grandmother. She has a degree in mathematics.
- **10 Downing Street** - London's Government house. The Prime Minister works from here.
- **Frederick Ashton** - Sarah's choreographer.
- **Claire** - IRA member. Leading a double life.
- **Eammon Devlin** - IRA terrorist. Runs the British cell.
- **Peter Frain** - Head of MI-5.
- **David Green** - One of Churchill's Personal Secretaries. Jewish. Gay.
- **Clara Hope** – Maggie's mother. Accomplished pianist.
- **Edith Hope** - Maggie's aunt. Lives in America. A science professor. Raised Maggie.
- **Edmund Hope** – Maggie's father. Brilliant professor at the London School of Economics.
- **Paige Kelly** - Virginia debutant who recently quit working for the American Foreign Minister due to his views on the war and the Nazis. One of Maggie's housemates.
- **Nigel Ludlow** - Chuck's boyfriend. A member of the RAF (Royal Air Force).
- **Charlotte (Chuck) McCaffrey** - Working at a local London hospital. One of Maggie's housemates.
- **Michael Murphy** - IRA bomber working in London. Masquerading as a priest.
- **Nelson** - Churchill's cat.
- **Simon Paul** – An acquaintance who went to college with David.

- **Malcolm Pierce** - President of the Saturday Club, a Fascist hate group. Spying for the Nazis.
- **Sarah Sanderson** - Dancer. Maggie's newest housemate.
- **Richard Snodgrass** - Head of Churchill's Personal Secretaries.
- **Diana Snyder** - Typist in the War Room. Murdered in order to create a job opportunity at 10 Downing Street.
- **Mark Standish and Hugh Thompson** - MI-5 agents.
- **John Sterling** - One of Churchill's Personal Secretaries. Sweet on Maggie.
- **Miss Stewart** - One of Churchill's secretaries/typists.
- **Walter Thompson** - Churchill's private detective.
- **Ms. Catherine Tinsley** - Churchill's senior secretary/typist.
- **Annabelle and Clarabelle Wiggett** - Twins. Two of Maggie's housemates. Annabelle is an actress and Clarabelle works in theater costuming.
- **Dimitri Zakharov** - Dancer. Sarah's partner. Polish

- **Neville Chamberlain** - England's Prime Minister before war with Germany was declared.
- **Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill** - Prime Minister of England during WWII.
- **Joseph Kennedy** - Former US ambassador to Britain. Removed from office due to his views on the war and the Nazis.

Story begins May 12, 1940. England has declared war with Germany, but the war has not yet reached English soil.

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. Did you find Maggie's character believable? Are there situations where she acted inconsistently with her character?
3. Which secondary character did you like the best? Which did you like the least? Why? Did you change your opinion of these people as the novel progressed and more information was revealed about them?
4. What's the single most important decision or realization that Maggie made during the course of the book?
5. How does the book reflect the time period or culture in which it was set? Were the depictions accurate?

6. Were you surprised at the twists in the plot? If so, which ones?
7. One of the main criticisms of this book is that there are too many coincidences that occur which strain the credibility of the reader. Do you agree with that sentiment?
8. Which betrayal do you think is worse for Maggie - Aunt Edith's or her father's?
9. Since women were limited in their choices of jobs, what job would you have chosen or attempted to obtain?
10. If you knew war was coming, would you send your children to the countryside where they should be safe or would you keep them with you in a "targeted" city?
11. What do you think of the preparations made in advance of the war/invasion? (Victory gardens, building bomb shelters, fences being removed to use the metal for ammunition, carrying kitchen knives, golf clubs, and pepper as weapons.) How would you prepare for an invasion if you suspected one was coming?
12. If a "real" weapon was not available, what common instrument would you plan to use?
13. What would have been the hardest part of rationing for you? For example: The characters cope with rationing, bombing raids, and clothing coupons, as well as other wartime necessities.
14. How do you feel about how the Londoners treated their animals/pets in preparation of the invasion? Are they being smart? Heartless? Sensible?
15. David says that Hitler and his closest men are evil, but the German people are not and that they must not feel as if they are pariahs (for the good of everyone after the war). Maggie responds that it would require "superhuman compassion." What do you think of both sentiments?
16. Do you believe art, dancing, and theater are important in a war zone?
17. How do you feel about the way the United States was portrayed in this book? Do you feel that was a genuine reflection of the feelings of that time and place?
18. Once the bombing of London started, would you have retreated to your bomb shelter or would you watch? Why do you think Churchill insisted on watching the first bombing?
19. What do you do to "Keep Plodding On?" What is your KPO?
20. There are currently 6 books in this series. Will you read them?

References:

- Fantastic Fiction – <https://www.fantasticfiction.com/m/susan-elia-macneal/>
- Goodreads – <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/10161216-mr-churchill-s-secretary>
- Lit Lovers - <http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/13-fiction/9727-mr-churchills-secretary-macneal?start=3>
- Scandalous Woman - <http://scandalouswoman.blogspot.com/2012/04/review-mr-churchills-secretary.html>
- Susan Elia MacNeal's website - <http://www.susaneliamacneal.com/index.html>
- Susan Elia MacNeal's blog - <http://susaneliamacneal.blogspot.com/2012/04/keep-calm-and-read-on.html>

Susan Elia MacNeal's Books

Maggie Hope Series

1. Mr. Churchill's Secretary (2012)
2. Princess Elizabeth's Spy (2012)
3. His Majesty's Hope (2013)
4. The Prime Minister's Secret Agent (2014)
5. Mrs. Roosevelt's Confidante (2015)
6. The Queen's Accomplice (2016)

Non fiction

- Wedding Zen (2004)
 - Infused (2006)
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If you liked Mr. Churchill's Secretary, try...

- Maisie Dobbs – Jacqueline Winspear
 - The War Against Miss Winter – Kathryn Miller Haine
 - The Beekeeper's Apprentice – Laurie R. King
 - Billy Boyle – James R. Benn
 - A Duty To The Dead – Charles Todd
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