

Reading Guide for Book Clubs



Nicolai's Daughters

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A Note from the Author

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There are many components to the process of writing and I like every aspect of it. Yes, even those lonely times when my characters aren't talking to me, my face is plastered as close as it can be to my laptop screen in hopes that some answer will appear, and I'm downing jujubes and/or jelly beans in thoughtless fistfuls and my husband is wondering if he'll have to take me to the clinic to have my stomach pumped. This is a roundabout way of saying that the opportunity to meet those of you who have read my book has got to be one of the best experiences of the writing process. I've been fortunate enough to be invited to a number of book club meetings since my novel was released in October 2012. I absolutely love meeting new people, hearing their impressions and opinions, engaging in conversation, and getting to know my audience through the questions I'm asked.

At one book club meeting someone asked me if there were any questions I'd been asked that stumped me. After all the edits and rewrites and living with my characters for six years, I felt pretty confident in saying there is nothing I don't know about my characters or their lives or their secrets. And you may be surprised to know that there were other secrets that surfaced about my characters in the writing of *Nicolai's Daughters* I didn't feel I could share or commit to print. Yup, it's true. Nicolai, Alexia, Theodora, Aunt Christina and even poor dead Sara shared their innermost confidences with me. Some I felt comfortable in sharing, in fact the characters insisted I do so. And other secrets I kept strictly between the character and me. You might ask me what other secrets there could have been or why I didn't share them. All I can say is there were plenty, as there are in all families. Some were important and needed to be revealed, while others remained a part of the family's history, insignificant to what was going on in the book.

The secret that haunted Nicolai's father, and subsequently his family, was obviously important. That secret needed to be uncovered, not only in order to reconcile the family, but also to allow the youngest Sarinopoulos generation to put the wartime tragedy of Kalavryta behind them. Other secrets, well, they just weren't that important to the story. This, I suspect, is true in real life too. For example, does it really matter to a family's growth that you might have stolen some coins from your parents' money jar when you were eight? Likely not. The same holds true in fiction. You only include what's important. I hope this makes sense. Okay, I think I've belaboured that point enough. Now, let's get back to our discussion of book clubs and some of their questions



By far the most popular question I'm asked is: **are any of the characters you?** My answer is a rather noncommittal "yes and no." I have experienced contentment, loneliness, grief and fear so great all I wanted to do was run away, not unlike what Nicolai does in my novel whenever things get too much for him. As human beings we all experience the gamut of feelings at some point or another in our lives. But, I am not any of my characters, or rather, none of my characters are me, although growing up in Canada, I did miss my cultural roots as Alexia does in the book — oh, and I absolutely hate olives, just like Alexia and Theodora. The Sarinopoulos family isn't my family and their history is not my history. In fact, I had to go looking for the place and time for the story I wanted to tell.

That's another popular question. **Where did the idea for this book come from?** Mostly ideas pop in and out of my head and I try to write them down before they disappear. I have pieces of paper everywhere, some fluttering at the edges of my many notebooks, others left on the bathroom counter or on the dresser, and still others trapped, the paper caught in the hinge of the glove box in the car. Whenever I come across one of these pieces of paper, I hope it will shake something loose and sprout into a story.

The idea for *Nicolai's Daughters* first came to me on a trip to Greece in 2006. I've always loved my cultural roots (as I think I mentioned earlier) and felt as though I'd missed them my whole life. So I wondered how different my life would have been if I had been born and raised in Greece. That was the first question. To test the theory of having a different life, I had to have at least two characters who somehow knew each other. That led to more questions: How would these people meet? Why would one have been raised in Greece, and the other in Canada? The idea of a secret half-sister came to me, and in order to have this happen, there had to be a father with his own history. Now I had three main characters and was still trying to figure out what their story was and why it was important to tell.

I started *Nicolai's Daughters* with a few images, some of these questions, thoughts really, mostly about loss and longing. It tends to be a theme of mine as a writer. I have some ideas about why that is, but I'll save that for a psychoanalyst's couch.

I have visited Greece on many occasions ever since I was a young child. I love the hospitality, the openness, and the generosity of Greeks, but at the same time I've always felt that there was something inherently sad and complacent at the root of all the superstitions I grew up with, some fear of happiness. In this book I wanted to explore this contradiction. Still, the whole project seemed pretty foggy, certainly nothing I could touch or hold on to. Every time I reached for it, the story vanished or gave me more questions to answer.



Greece has been a nation that has fought many battles and been conquered many times in its history, yet somehow Greeks have maintained their culture. I didn't know how any of this fit in or even what I wanted to write exactly, until I visited Kalavryta. The novel found its soul in that tiny mountain village.

This was the place of a great tragedy during WWII. On December 13, 1943, German forces massacred all the males over the age of thirteen and locked the women and children in the school in Kalavryta and set it on fire. Many of the women and children escaped. Only thirteen males over the age of thirteen survived. Some 700 civilians were killed during what the Germans called Operation Kalavryta. Twenty-eight communities — towns, villages, monasteries and settlements — were destroyed. In Kalavryta, approximately 1,000 houses were looted and burned.

I listened to the testimonials of the victims recorded in the Kalavryta museum, which had once been the village school, and climbed Kappi Hill myself where the massacre happened —considered the worse atrocity perpetrated by the Nazis in Greece during WWII—and realized I wanted to tell the Kalavryta story through my characters, and at the same time explore all my other questions: the differences between siblings raised in Canada vs. Greece, the compromises made and secrets kept in order to survive war and what all this does to a nation, and a family (because ultimately this is where the horrors of war are visited and take their toll), not only at the time of the tragedy, but also its impact on the family's subsequent generations.

One of the testimonials I listened to in Kalavryta was by a man in his eighties. He talked about being lined up with the other men and boys that bright December day and being asked by a German soldier how old he was. He lied about his age. He didn't know what made him lie because he had no idea what was to come. He lied almost as an act of defiance. It saved his life. He broke down during his testimonial, saying he'd felt guilty his whole life for surviving while all his friends died. I've often thought about that man and what the impact would be on a survivor with so much guilt to bear. True, Nicolai's father's guilt is based on a different set of circumstances, but I came to realize what living with the weight of such guilt means in a person's life, first through the pain I saw in eyes of the man in the testimonial recording (who had a difficult time looking into the camera as he spoke) and later in the damaged human being that is Nicolai's father.



Someone asked me at another book club meeting **if I had planned out the novel, perhaps through some outline technique.** I do start with an outline of sorts because the blank page frightens me at first. So an outline gives me the crutch I need to get started. And I do lean on it until the story takes off. Once that happens, I'm just putting down what I hear in my head, what the characters are telling me to write and I pursue each story line, because if I don't my characters won't let me sleep.

I fall in love with all my characters — yes, even the dastardly ones. I love their humanity. Book clubs have asked about Nicolai. **How could he leave his little girl?** All I can say is his grief overwhelmed him to the point he felt he had no choice. And of course, he was afraid that his anger would hurt her eventually, as his father's anger had hurt him. So, in part, he leaves to protect her. There are always at least two sides I feel I must consider.

More often, I'm asked **how Alexia could get involved with Achilles.** My answer to this question is always the same: do you know any smart women who haven't done one or two dumb things in their lives? Without exception, I typically get back the same response: a chorus of hummed shared agreement and a wave of understanding in their eyes. We've all done dumb things, things we're not proud of. Just like life, the characters have to be real. They have to be like us in order for us to care about them, understand them, and ultimately empathize with them. One of the nicest compliments I receive from book clubs and others who write to me is: they didn't want the book to end because they knew they would miss the characters. This feeling, this compassion and closeness the reader has with my work, the people and lives I've created, is what I strive for as a writer. And when it happens or my audience tells me it's happened for them, I'm very grateful.

I'm often asked **about Achilles. Why is he so wicked?** Well, I don't see him in that way. I think he is who he is because he lost his own grandfather in the Kalavryta massacre. Can you imagine how it must feel to lose your family, the life you knew, in such a horrific way? All my characters, including Achilles, were affected by that tragedy. He just displays his loss, his inability to commit, in a different way. And to be fair to him, there is a scene in *Nicolai's Daughters* where he wishes he could be different. This glimpse into his own regrets, his own desire to be better doesn't last long, but it is there, and it is there because as a writer and as a person, I just don't believe anyone is totally bad. I typically give an example from my former prison life (no, I wasn't an inmate, but I did work in prisons in the early part of my career). I could have a violent offender who had done some horrible, unspeakable things and yet would take in a stray kitten and nurse it back to health with the loving tenderness of a mother. When I give my audience this example, again I see nods and feel I've given them a chance to look at *Nicolai's Daughters* and, in particular, Achilles, in a different way.



If you as a reader are reacting to my characters, whether you like them or hate them, I feel I've done my job. We've connected. I love that! I invite you to join me on my blog, where I talk about the writing process (among other things):

<http://www.stellaharvey.com/blog/64-where-does-this-stuff-come-from.html>

Questions for Book Clubs

1. Kalavryta plays an important role in the novel. How does it loom over the lives of the main characters? What is its impact on their lives?
2. In their own ways Nicolai and Alexia both avoid commitment. Why do you think that is? How is their commitment phobia the same and different?
3. Nicolai goes through a string of young women. Why is he attracted to younger women rather than women his own age? Think about when his wife may have died.
4. Do you think the male characters in the novel are weak and chauvinistic? What are the other sides they also display?
5. In *Nicolai's Daughters*, resolution ultimately comes to the youngest generation of the family, namely Alexia and Theodora. Why is it possible for this generation and why was this resolution impossible for Nicolai and his father to achieve? Why is it that Nicolai and his father never resolve their relationship or the impact of Kalavryta on them? What stops them?
6. Uncle Solon has a pretty small role in the novel. But what is it about him that forces Christina and the others to face their secrets?
7. Which characters did you empathize with the most? Why?
8. What impressions are you left with about Greek society? The Greek family?
9. Why does Achilles appear in both parts of the book, in the lives of both Nicolai and Alexia? How is he a catalyst?
10. How is Alexia different and the same as her half-sister, Theodora?
11. How does Alexia change through the course of the novel? How does Theodora change through the course of the novel? What about Nicolai? Or Aunt Christina?

