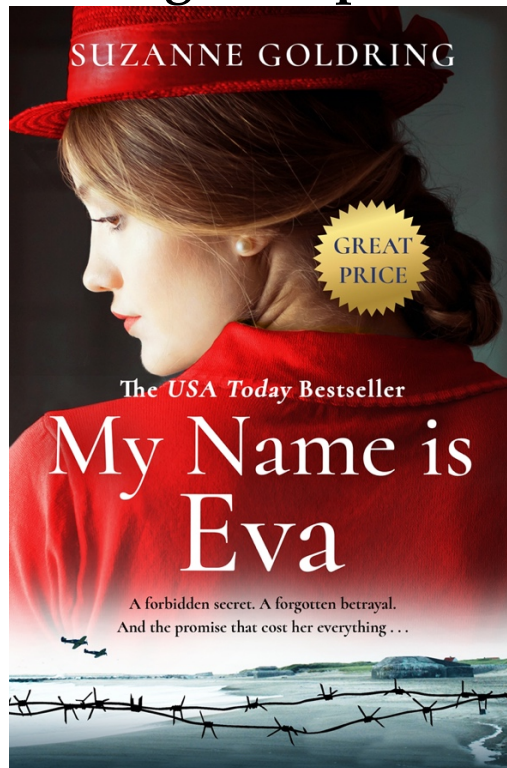




MY NAME IS EVA

Reading Group Guide



The Inspiration for *My Name Is Eva*

Many novelists plan their books from the outset, identifying areas for research well before they begin putting words onto paper. But the birth of this novel began with what I like to think of as “seeds,” which germinated in my mind over a long period of time, then grew into the story you have just read.

My journey began more than ten years ago, when two elderly ladies giggled like schoolgirls and gave me tantalizing glimpses of their wartime lives. Betty was in her late nineties, living in a care home, and I often took her great friend Lindsay to visit her. Betty was frail and rarely left her room, where she imperiously rang for a tray of coffee to be brought to us. While she sat in an armchair in her cashmere dressing gown, her lipstick always perfect, Lindsay wobbled and laughed as she sat on the bubbling waterbed.

Gradually over a series of visits, they revealed that as young women of a certain social class, they had joined MI5 and MI6 early in WWII. Both wanted to “do their bit” for the war effort and had thought of joining one of the divisions of the armed forces, but their intelligence and social connections meant they were considered suitable for recruitment by the British secret services. However, discovering exactly what they had done proved more difficult than I could have imagined, as they and the other women I subsequently interviewed clammed up when pressed for information, usually saying they had only “done a lot of filing.” They had all been trained to keep their secrets to themselves, and so the idea of what shocking secrets might be buried deeply within the memories of a seemingly harmless,

very elderly lady began to grow. Not long after hearing these sketchy revelations, a cousin brought me a cache of flimsy wartime correspondence tightly packed into a shoebox hidden at the back of her late mother's wardrobe. Reading the letters and helping my cousin to identify characters in equally old photographs, we both agreed this correspondence gave a strong feeling of the spirit of the time and deserved to be saved, despite other relatives thinking they were not of interest. I then transcribed the whole collection to make it more accessible to family members, becoming more and more engrossed by the sentiments expressed as I typed out their tender words.

Written by my great-aunt Nora to her young husband, Fred, known as "Tiny," the letters dated from the time the war started and captured the determination and optimism of the British at war. Many of the letters were written in pencil on official letterhead marked "Somewhere in France," and many were censored in thick black ink. Tiny was posted to France with the Highland Light Infantry and made it back to Britain in May 1940 in the famous British Dunkirk evacuation. Sadly, Tiny was killed while retraining with the RAF in 1942, soon after the birth of his only child. Through an elderly family friend, I then heard that my aunt had worked for the UNRRA in post-war Germany in 1948. Reading about the work this organization did to help displaced persons and finding out that Nora had been posted to Frankfurt, I began to investigate which camps had been nearby and stumbled across an account of Wildflecken, possibly the largest refugee and resettlement camp of this period. This made me realize that my aunt would have seen and heard extraordinary stories during her time in Germany, which she had never revealed. Wildflecken had

been established by the Germans as a secret SS training camp, and when it was taken over by the Allies, it still had great stores of equipment including skis.

Real letters are hardly ever written in today's world of emails, texts, and social media. But during the 1940s, regular correspondence was a vital link between home and the forces serving overseas, maintaining spirits and keeping relationships alive. Nora and Tiny wrote to each other nearly every day, detailing routine activities, their hopes for the future, and their enduring love for each other. I knew from the start that letters would be a vital part of Evelyn's story and had to be the way she would continue communicating with her late husband.

But when it came to deciding what the crux of the novel should be, I had to decide what kind of secret would someone feel they had to hide for the whole of their life? I sketched out various scenarios, dismissing Nazi hunting as inappropriate for the central character, but knowing that the secret had to be personal and deeply troubling. And it was only shortly before I began writing the novel that I came across information about the work of the British intelligence services in post-war Germany and discovered what had happened in the Combined Services Detailed Interrogation Centre at Bad Nenndorf, which really did earn the title of the Forbidden Village. Reading about the treatment of prisoners there, I became convinced that this had to be a crucial part of the story.

To learn more about the training of SOE agents, I visited the Secret Army Exhibition at Beaulieu in the New Forest in Hampshire, which revealed the mysteries of coding, silent killing, and secret inks.

It was there that I learnt that the acronym for the Special Operations Executive was jokingly re-interpreted by its recruits as the “Stately ‘Omes of England,” as many of the training centers, including Beaulieu, were grand country houses with large estates. And one of the elderly ladies I interviewed had, after assuring me she had not done anything of great importance, suddenly told me she had dealt with “secret inks,” which in her case involved holding correspondence from certain agents over a steaming kettle to reveal messages written in lemon juice, egg white, or urine! Learning about the selection of agents for covert work and about the recruitment of personnel at top-secret Bletchley Park also led me to think that Evelyn would be a life-long crossword addict. Puzzling over cryptic clues would help to keep her ageing mind sharp, and it is well known that such word games maintain mental agility. That gave me the idea of setting clues, written exactly as they would be for a cryptic crossword, for the section headings. Some readers have found these baffling, but they are set out just as they are in Evelyn’s favorite daily newspaper, *The Daily Telegraph*, and the solutions are all presented in the final pages of the book. Furthermore, special agents would often be assigned a song or poem to use as the basis for their coding and decoding of messages, hence the use of a well-known hymn as the source of the clues. Real agents, of course, could not have used anything as familiar as *All Things Bright and Beautiful*, the hymn I chose to use, but would have employed an obscure composition or an original poem code such as “The Life That I Have,” which was issued to Violette Szabo, a British SOE agent who was captured, tortured, and killed by the Nazis.

Volunteering for a local residential home where the elderly

are cared for with the greatest patience and respect helped me to understand how Evelyn would adapt to her new environment. And talking to the residents, writing their life stories, and running their book club, which I still do, showed me that an agile mind can often still inhabit a frail body and how important it is for the elderly to retain freedom of choice and maintain their dignity. I reached the decision to make Evelyn pretend she is losing her faculties after much deliberation. I realised that a physically frail person would have very few resources available to them and that this would be the only defense left to Evelyn if she was determined to hide her most precious secret forever.

My time with the residents has also convinced me that everyone should talk to their elderly relatives, ask them about their experiences, and record their stories to pass on to future generations. Even if they believe they have not led a remarkable life, their tales of the past, before the internet, before modern conveniences, before fast food and fast travel, are in stark contrast to the world today, and we can all learn from them.

I hope you loved *My Name Is Eva*, and if you did I would be very grateful if you could write a review. I'd love to hear what you think, and it makes such a difference helping new readers to discover one of my books for the first time.

For further reading, please see:

The Spy Who Loved by Clare Mulley

The Debs of Bletchley Park by Michael Smith
Forgotten Voices of the Secret War by Roderick Bailey
Auschwitz by Laurence Rees
The Wild Place by K. Holme
Alone in Berlin by Hans Fallada
Cruel Britannia by Ian Cobain
Love and War in the Wrns by Vicky Unwin

Questions for Readers

1. Do you think we all have different sides to our personalities, as characterized by the different names applied to the central character in the novel?
2. It is said that revenge is a dish best served cold, but do you think Evelyn should have taken so long to carry out her revenge?
3. In what way do the two murders differ, and do you think either was justified?
4. Eva's child is the result of a brutal attack, yet she loves her baby from birth. Do you think this is unusual?
5. How did Evelyn manage to sustain her love for her husband?
6. What do you think of Pat's attitude towards her aunt?
7. Why was Evelyn so determined to keep her secrets hidden?
8. Should Evelyn have traced her daughter and made it possible for her to benefit from the family estate?
9. Was Evelyn right to give her niece power of attorney?
10. Evelyn clearly wanted to retain control over her destiny. Do you think she was right, and did she manage to achieve this?