

# DISCUSSION GUIDE

*Liar Temptress Soldier Spy:  
Four Women Undercover  
In The Civil War*  
by Karen Abbott

BOOK GROUP

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

*Reprinted from publisher*

Karen Abbott worked as a journalist on the staffs of *Philadelphia* magazine and *Philadelphia Weekly*, and has written for Salon.com and other publications. She is the author of *Sin in the Second City*. A native of Philadelphia, she now lives with her husband in Atlanta, where she's at work on her next book. Visit her online at [www.sininthesecondcity.com](http://www.sininthesecondcity.com).

## BOOK SUMMARY

Karen Abbott, the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Sin in the Second City* and “pioneer of sizzle history” (*USA Today*), tells the spellbinding true story of four women who risked everything to become spies during the Civil War.

Karen Abbott illuminates one of the most fascinating yet little known aspects of the Civil War: the stories of four courageous women—a socialite, a farm girl, an abolitionist, and a widow—who were spies.

After shooting a Union soldier in her front hall with a pocket pistol, Belle Boyd became a courier and spy for the Confederate army, using her charms to seduce men on both sides. Emma Edmonds cut off her hair and assumed the identity of a man to enlist as a Union private, witnessing the bloodiest battles of the Civil War. The beautiful widow, Rose O'Neale Greenhow, engaged in affairs with powerful Northern politicians to gather intelligence for the Confederacy, and used her young daughter to send information to Southern generals. Elizabeth Van Lew, a wealthy Richmond abolitionist, hid behind her proper Southern manners as she orchestrated a far-reaching espionage ring, right under the noses of suspicious rebel detectives.

Using a wealth of primary source material and interviews with the spies' descendants, Abbott seamlessly weaves the adventures of these four heroines throughout the tumultuous years of the war. With a cast of real-life characters including Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, General Stonewall Jackson, detective Allan Pinkerton, Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln, and Emperor Napoleon III, *Liar, Temptress, Soldier, Spy* draws you into the war as these daring women lived it.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How many in the group recall learning about Belle Boyd, Elizabeth Van Lew, Rose O'Neal Greenhow, or Sarah Emma Edmonds prior to this book? Given their individual stories, is that surprising? Why do you think this is?
2. Author Karen Abbott specifically did not want to write about a single individual, instead repeatedly calling on the word *tapestry* to describe the weaving of multiple stories. Why do you think she chose these four women specifically?
3. Which of the four primary characters most fascinated you or elicited the strongest connection for you? Why? How might you guess Abbott herself answered this question? [Click [here](#) to find out.]
4. What factors might influence how we respond to each character? Did the affiliation with North or South matter to you? Personality? Circumstances? Traditional bias toward how women should behave?
5. For each of the four women, what were the most memorable escapades? How effective was each in advancing her cause?
6. Did you feel you had good sense of what in their pasts led these women to these roles? Did any surprise you?
7. What made the women more effective as spies than their male counterparts?
8. How did the women turn societal assumptions or traditions regarding gender to their advantage?
9. How would you describe each character's relationships with the men in their lives?
10. Which of the supporting characters made an impression? For instance, what did you think of the parts played by Jerome Robbins or Mary Bowser?
11. Is each word in the title intended to correspond to one of the women, or does it hold a different message?
12. How effective is the title in drawing a reader? In establishing a tone for the writer's approach?
13. The author's intention was that this history read like a novel. How successful was she? What qualities support or contradict that intent?
14. What is gained by intertwining the four stories in a chronological structure? Would you have preferred to focus on one character at a time in four sections?
15. Abbott begins with the assurance that everything is factual, drawn from primary sources. Some readers question whether this can be true, even if that were her intention. What do you think? Does the issue affect your experience of the book?

16. Most everyone studies the Civil War, but hardly any are taught about Civil War spies, much less women as spies. Why not? What is the value of history instruction beyond battles and traditional leaders? Would you argue for better inclusion of stories like these in general histories?
17. Would you argue that this book holds appeal for both male and female readers? Why or why not? How do you feel about this?
18. Karen Abbott enjoys writing about unconventional women in history who break the rules. If you have read her other accounts (*Sin in the Second City*, *American Rose*), how would you say this work compares?
19. Abbott's next work is a novel about a real-life female con artist in the Gilded Age. Would you follow her into historical fiction? How do you think she'll do?

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