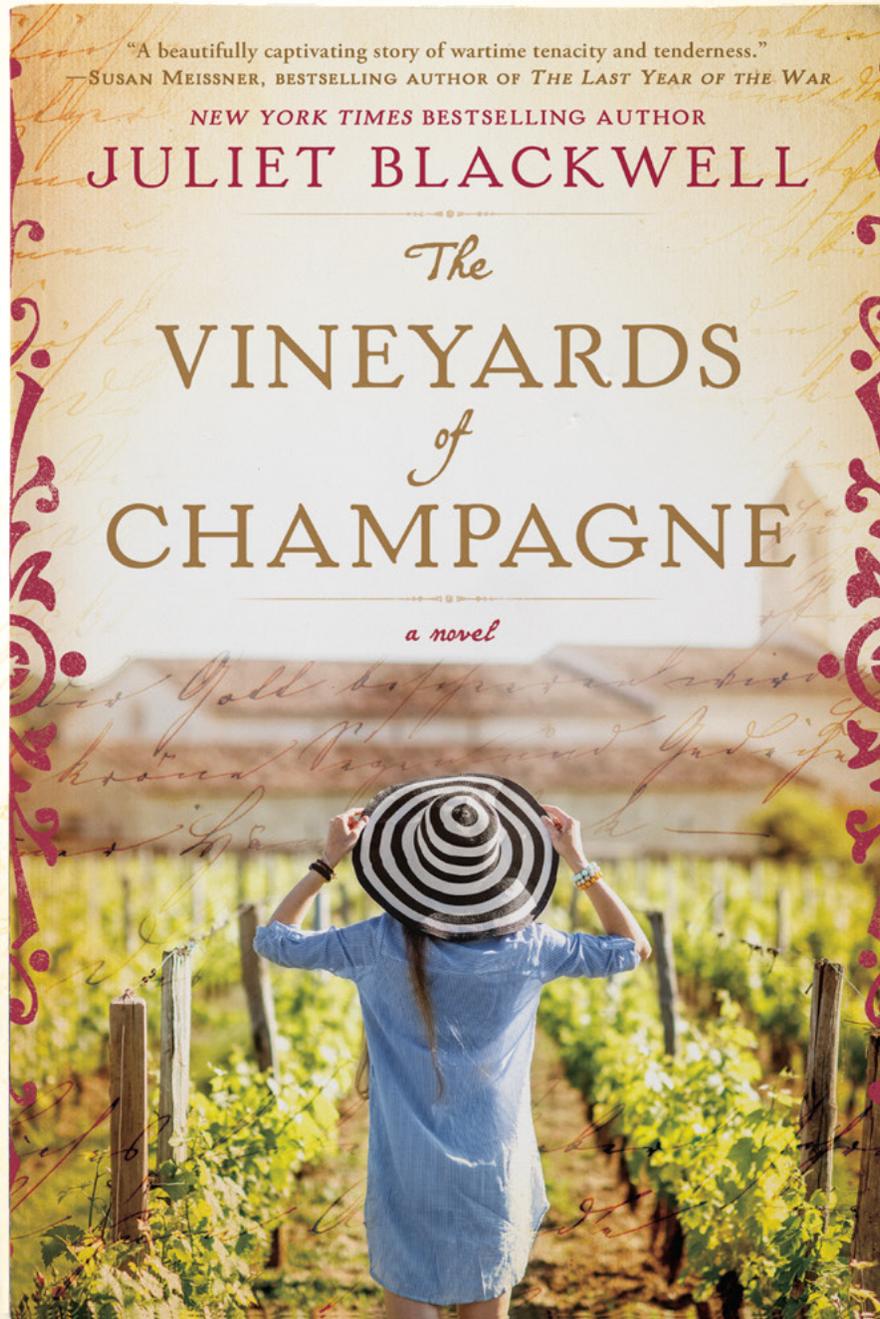


Book Club Kit



Dear Readers,

I am honored that your book club has chosen to read *The Vineyards of Champagne*! I hope you will savor the history and the secrets that lie beneath, and within, those iconic vineyards.

At the heart of *The Vineyards of Champagne* are themes of love and of loss, which are rooted in my own experience with the sudden passing of a loved one a few years ago. A blow like that can leave a person reeling, unsure how to navigate the new normal: how to survive, how to face each day, and whether it is even possible again to feel peace, much less joy.

Most people can relate to these feelings, if not because of the death of a loved one then through the many other challenges life throws at us: the loss of a job or one's health, the simple passage of time, or an unresolved relationship. Each of these challenges demands that we confront and let go of what could have been. Of what should have been.

Visiting the Champagne region of France, I found myself surrounded by historic wineries, fabulous food, and warm people, but also by a legacy of almost unthinkable loss. History has not been kind to the champagnois—the people of Champagne—who live in a region that has for centuries been a theater of war. During World War I, so many soldiers and civilians died in the fierce fighting that bodies were at times left unburied in the fields, and the living were forced to seek refuge belowground within the extensive wine caves. It was, in a very real way, “a world turned upside down.”

In fact, some locals say the evanescence of their famous bubbly is, in part, a gift to help them survive such hard times.

The true story of the women, children, and elderly champagnois who inhabited the caves under the French city of Reims during World War I captured my imagination. When I learned that they brought in the harvest despite the barbarous fighting of the war, investing their hopes and dreams for the future in these “victory vintages,” I was deeply touched by their resilience and undying hope despite all odds.

The Vineyards of Champagne tells the story of Rosalyn Acosta, who is reeling from the sudden death of her husband. She's not a fan of France, or even of champagne, but as a buyer for a wine importer she finds herself on a plane to Paris, where a chance meeting forges an unusual friendship. Rosalyn is introduced to a cache of letters from a young French soldier to his *marraine de guerre*, or “war godmother,” in Australia. As the story of living—and dying—during the First World War unfolds, Rosalyn begins to piece together her own life and learns that overcoming grief does not mean forgetting the past or “moving on,” but rather moving toward peace . . . and discovering how, once again, to find joy.

As an avid reader myself, I adore imagining a group of readers getting together to share impressions of *The Vineyards of Champagne*, and—I hope!—perhaps tasting a bottle or two of bubbly.

Because how better to savor a book about Champagne than with the sparkle of champagne?

Best,

Juliet

Champagne

CHEAT SHEET

You don't have to be a trained sommelier to enjoy champagne! Nor should the beverage be reserved only for special occasions—there are plenty of really good, reasonably priced champagnes (and sparkling wines) on the market.

Characteristics:

Clarity: Is the wine clear, cloudy, or opaque?

Color: Is it pale, straw, golden, or amber?

Bubbles: Are they large or small, graceful or frenetic?

Acidity: Is it dry or fruity, sour or sweet?

Aroma: Is it floral, citrus, mineral, or yeasty?

Intensity: How strong is it? How easy is it to pick out the bouquet's notes with your nose, and with your palate?

Taste: Look for subtle "notes" as you drink, such as: nuts, tobacco, vanilla, licorice, rose, violet, dried fruits, citrus, stone fruits, berries, chalk, toast, caramel, honey.

Finish: After swallowing, let the notes linger across your palate before taking another sip. Appreciate how long the flavors endure, and which notes have the greatest longevity. The finest champagnes will feature long, drawn-out flavors that allow you to savor and enjoy for a while.

Fun Facts:

True champagne is a sparkling wine that comes exclusively from the Champagne region of France. Sparkling wines from other parts of France are referred to as crémants—and many are as good, or better, than true champagnes.

Champagne is marked as "brut," "sec," or "doux." Brut is the dry, doux is the sweet, and sec is in between. Brut is often considered the most refined champagne, but drink whichever style most appeals to you!

Don't drink it too cold! Let the bottle sit out of the fridge for about 15 minutes before serving. The ideal temperature is 47–50 degrees Fahrenheit.

Uncork the bottle by removing the wire cage then, using a towel, carefully twist and pull the cork. Flying corks can be dangerous, and a big *pop* wastes champagne as well as effervescence.

No need to swirl—the famous bubbles add to the aroma as they rise to the surface, releasing the bouquet.

Coarser champagnes will feature big and rough bubbles; more refined champagnes have more delicate bubbles that travel gracefully to the rim. **It is said that a single glass can release up to two million tiny bubbles!**

Tall flutes maintain their effervescence better than the wide "coupe" glasses that many of us associate with champagne. Pour just half a glass to best appreciate the bubbles and flavor.

The first gulp should be a big one—let it fill your mouth and glide across your palate. Sip the rest.

Bonne dégustation! Drink up and enjoy!

A conversation with JULIET BLACKWELL



© Joseph Schell Photography

How would you describe *The Vineyards of Champagne*?

At its core, *The Vineyards of Champagne* is a novel about resilience and endurance in the face of what can seem like overwhelming loss. It is about dealing with profound grief and finding a way back to life, and to the possibility of joy. All of this is set against the backdrop of a fascinating region of France: Champagne has been a theater of war for many centuries, culminating in the First and Second World Wars. The story's contemporary characters are facing their own challenges, of course, and while they are not subject to the vicissitudes of wartime, they, too, face the eternal emotions of craving connection while fearing loss.

What compelled you to write this novel?

To tell the truth, I'm not a champagne fan—I'm more a red wine drinker. But when I accompanied my wine-importer boyfriend on a trip to visit his producers in Champagne, I gained a new appreciation for bubbly. But that wasn't the biggest thing I learned. I had never heard that during the First World War the Rémois (the citizenry of Reims) sought shelter in the vast network of champagne caves under the city.

Not only did they move belowground themselves, their families, and whatever belongings they could salvage from their homes, but they also set up hospitals and cafes, schools and barbershops, all in the champagne *crayères*. When a local friend told me they had a saying that in WWI “the world turned upside down, with carnage aboveground and the living city below,” I knew I had to see the caves myself, and to write a story about what life must have been like for the women, children, and elderly left behind in Reims during the war. Finally, when I learned that the grape harvest was brought in by women and children during those years, despite the ongoing German shelling, I couldn’t help but think of the metaphor of bringing in the harvest despite everything, knowing the vintage wouldn’t be drinkable until after the war, when their beloved champagne would be used to celebrate the peace.

***The Vineyards of Champagne* is your fourth novel set in France, following *The Paris Key*, *Letters from Paris*, and *The Lost Carousel of Provence*. What is your relationship with France and what inspires you to set your novels there?**

I’ve spent a lot of time in Europe, primarily in France and Spain. I love every step on cobblestone streets, the lilting languages, the sumptuous food and wine, the lingering over meals, and spending unhurried time with family and friends. I adore the ancient buildings and the palpable sense of history. I’m not fluent in French, but I try my best, and with the exception of a few touristy areas of Paris, I’ve always been welcomed with open arms as I stumble through with my inadequate French. Now that I have the opportunity to accompany my boyfriend as he scouts out new wines and visits producers, I get to spend several months a year in France, which is hardly a hardship! And I never run out of story lines in such a

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beautiful, complicated land, so rife with historical tales and treasures. This summer we're going back to do research for my next book, set on an island off the Côte Sauvage in Brittany, and then we'll visit family in the Franche-Comté and Provence, and then we'll help bring in the harvest in Limoux, just south of Carcassonne.

Your novel is based on the “war godmothers” of WWI. Tell us about them.

My sister is a historian, and she helps me a lot with my books—and keeps me from making embarrassing mistakes with history. She was doing some research for me on the situation of women in WWI and stumbled across an article about the *marraines de guerre*, the “war godmothers,” who organized to write letters and send occasional care packages to soldiers on the front—sort of like wartime pen pals. Mail service was interrupted in parts of France, so a lot of the soldiers had no consistent connection with their homes and families. The fighting was so brutal it was essential to remind the young men of what they were fighting for and why they were risking their lives: for their mothers and wives and sisters, and their country as a whole. Interestingly, some critics thought the correspondence would promote immoral behavior since so many of the *marraines* were single, as were the men—and in truth, there are probably some love stories to be found in their correspondence! I found the concept of war godmothers to be both beautiful and heartbreaking . . . and, of course, ripe for use in a novel.

What kind of research did you do? Did anything surprise you?

We stayed with a small champagne producer while visiting the cities of Reims and Épernay, and of course I was intent on seeing all the wine cellars I could—especially the vast network of tunnels

under the cities, where graffiti from both wars can be found carved into the chalk walls. I was fascinated to learn about champagne making and how the process differs from that of other wines. But the thing that most surprised me about Champagne was how humble the small-town winemakers and locals are about their champagne, which is a drink I grew up associating with luxury and wealth. Don't get me wrong; they are very proud of their bubbly nectar! But in Champagne the bubbly is not always considered a luxury item but simply their beloved local wine.

I was also surprised to learn about Barbe-Nicole Clicquot and Louise Pommery, two formidable widows who transformed the champagne industry in the nineteenth century—at a time when women were rarely involved in commerce. Not only did they improve the techniques of champagne making, advance international sales, and increase the mystique of champagne, but they also looked out for the women in their community by providing social security and establishing orphanages.

Which character in the novel do you relate to the most?

I suffered a devastating loss in my own family a few years ago, so I relate most immediately to Rosalyn's feeling of being shattered—but still forcing myself to “put one foot in front of the other,” even when I would much rather go hide. Grief is a savage, feral, frightening thing, but its effects can change over time and with life experience. Just like Rosalyn, I will never forget my lost loved one, but I have found ways to balance the sadness with beauty, and to find a form of peace with the imperative to “live the questions.”

In your novels, including *The Vineyards of Champagne*, you take your readers on a journey back and forth between past and present. In this case, you alternate

between present day and the ever-popular World War I-era France. Could you talk about why this writing structure is especially appealing to you?

Until doing research for *The Vineyards of Champagne* I hadn't truly understood that the young people who survived World War I and painstakingly rebuilt their lives and their cities, towns, and businesses were faced a mere twenty years later with the prospect of sending their own children to the slaughter—and were forced to watch their cities, homes, and farms invaded and destroyed once again. That sort of historical legacy does have an impact on people, and some of those effects are passed on through the generations. In my novels, I'm intrigued by a contemporary character stumbling upon a story from the past, and through investigating and researching it, making a connection that transcends the years, and reaching out for someone they've never met. Finally, I like the sense of history as a living thing—something that can still have an impact and change who we are, and how we see the world.

What do you hope readers will take away after reading *The Vineyards of Champagne*?

A sense of resilience and endurance. The frightened but unbowed citizens hiding in the caves yet bringing in the harvest. The grapes being harvested under wartime conditions, but only drinkable when mature—as bubbly bottles of joyous hope. The need to create meaning, and beauty, and hope—and to find love and human connection, no matter how dire life can seem at times.

Also, readers might learn just a little something about the next bottle of bubbly they're pouring!

*Just like Rosalyn,
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Playlist

Songs that inspired the novel

“The Sun Ain’t Gonna Shine Anymore” performed by the Walker Brothers

“Je Suis Malade” by Lara Fabian

“Dernière Danse” by Indila

“Champagne” by Lia Marie Johnson

“Hurt” performed by Johnny Cash

“Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag” by Felix and George Henry Powell

“Ne Me Quitte Pas” by Jacques Brel

“My Immortal” by Evanescence

“I’ll Be Seeing You” performed by Billie Holiday

“Je T’Aime à la Folie” by Serge Lama

“I Can’t Stand the Rain” performed by Ann Peebles

“Les Feuilles Mortes” by Yves Montand

“Hanging on the Old Barbed Wire” performed by Frank McConnell

“Sympathique” by Pink Martini

“Champagne Supernova” by Oasis

“Hier Encore” by Charles Aznavour

“Another Lonely Day” by Ben Harper

“Dance Me to the End of Love” by Leonard Cohen

“Don’t Think I Don’t Think About It” performed by Darius Rucker

“La Vie en Rose” by Edith Piaf

“Don’t Know Why” performed by Norah Jones

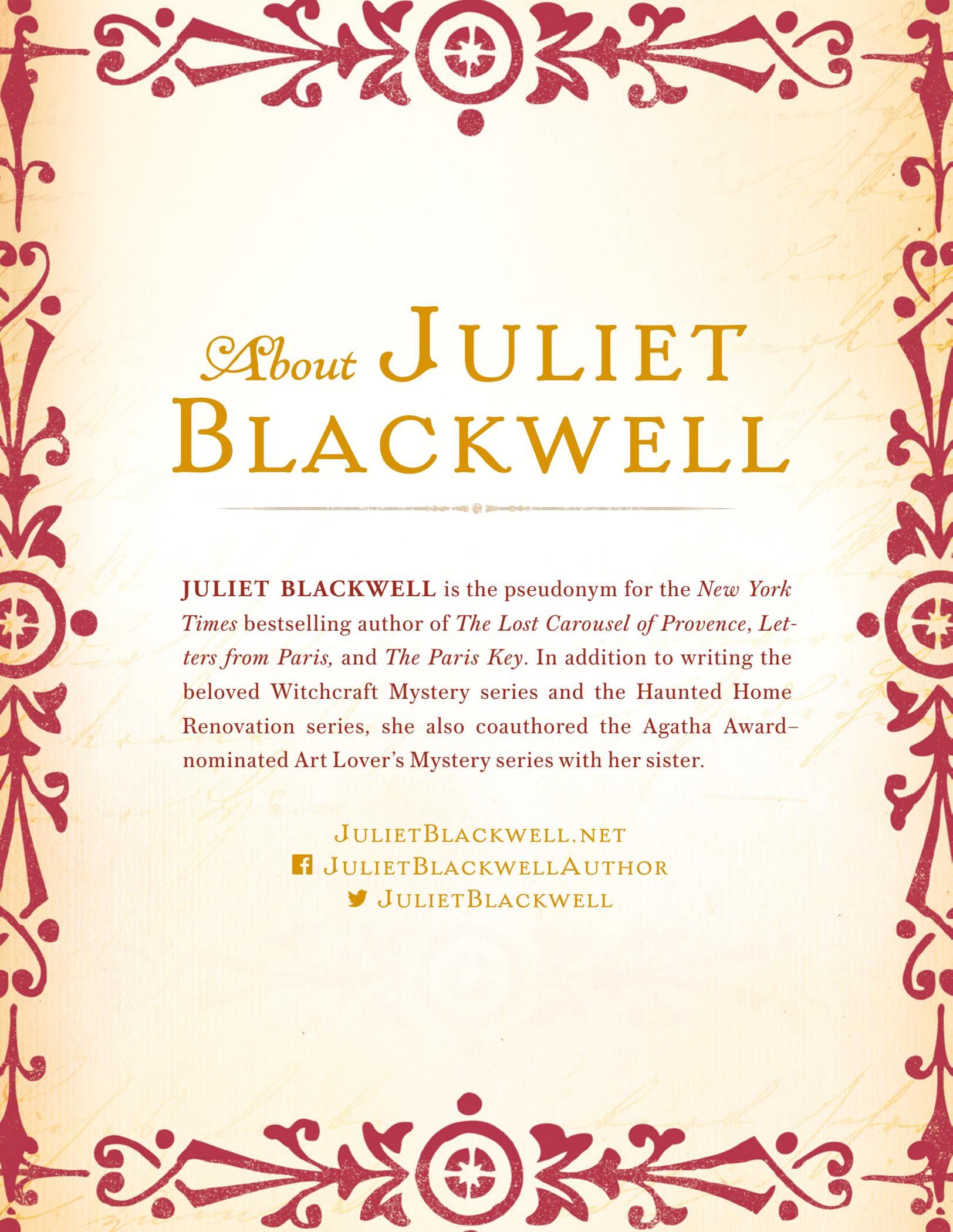
“C’est Si Bon” performed by Yves Montand

“Feeling Good” performed by Nina Simone

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If you could have coffee with one character from the novel, who would it be and why? What would you like to discuss with them?
2. Would you say the dominant theme of *The Vineyards of Champagne* is about love or about loss?
3. In the first part of the novel, Rosalyn is searching for a “hermitage”—what does she mean by this? What are the benefits of her retreat, and what are the drawbacks? Have you ever felt the need for something similar?
4. How would you characterize Rosalyn’s relationship with Dash? Why was she angry with him? Was that anger justified?
5. In what ways were the challenges Rosalyn faced unique to her personality and circumstances? In what ways were they similar to what many women face?
6. Did you find Rosalyn’s story depressing, uplifting, or some combination of the two?
7. Wartime is horrific in so many ways, but—like grief—it sometimes reveals new depths of character and strips away falseness. Without romanticizing the past, are there any positives to living through a war?
8. Which character in the novel did you relate to the most, and why?
9. Were there any characters you didn’t like? What was it that you found unappealing?
10. The working title for this novel was *The Widows of Champagne*. How has widowhood affected characters other than Rosalyn, such as Doris, Lucie, and other war widows, or “Champagne widows” Louise Pommery and Barbe-Nicole Clicquot?
11. Grief is an intensely personal experience. Does Rosalyn’s journey ring true given your own experience of loss and mourning? If not, how did Rosalyn’s journey differ from yours?
12. Why do you think Lucie and her family decided to remain in Reims after the war began? What do you think you would do if faced with a similar scenario?
13. What did you think of Blackwell’s use of language? Did the characters “sound” different in your mind, as you read the book?
14. Since *The Vineyards of Champagne* is set in France, do you like that the author included French words and phrases?

15. Imagine you were in Lucie's situation. How do you think you would have coped with the confinement and the lack of natural light and fresh air while living in the caves under the House of Pommery? How would caring for your family and handling daily needs pose new challenges? What would have sustained you?
16. What did you know about the First World War before reading this novel? About the city of Reims or the process of champagne making? What was the most interesting or the most surprising thing you learned from reading the book?
17. *The Vineyards of Champagne* deals with female friendship, and the somewhat offbeat trio of Rosalyn, Emma, and Blondine. How is each character influenced by her friendship with the other two?
18. If you were making a movie of *The Vineyards of Champagne*, who would you cast for each role?
19. Have you ever run into a problem in a foreign country and ended up "stranded"—for instance, in need of gas without a functioning credit card? How did you feel in that moment, and how did you find a solution? In what ways does it feel different to be stranded abroad compared with encountering difficulties in one's own country?
20. Lucie says that her mother sees beauty in necessity, whereas Lucie sees a necessity of beauty. What do you think she means by that? Which perspective better reflects your own?
21. Have you ever visited the Champagne region or traveled to another part of France? Did the cultural aspects of the book ring true for you?
- Did anything feel different compared to your own travel experience? For instance, did you notice an obsession with preparing and eating dinner?
22. Emma's great-great-aunt Doris was embittered and disappointed by life, but found new purpose as a *marraine de guerre*. How did Doris's connection to Émile, and then to Lucie, offer her a kind of redemption?
23. The Champagne region of France has been a theater of war for many centuries. What impact do you think such a history has on the people who live there, and on the regional psyche? How might such a legacy resonate through generations?
24. The women living underground in Reims brought in the harvest every fall, despite the dangers, hoping their champagne would be a "victory vintage" that would be ready to drink after the war ended. Why do you think they took such big risks?
25. What do you think Rosalyn decides to do at the end of the book, after finishing the harvest? Does she remain in France, return to Napa, or make a different decision entirely? What do you wish for her—and for Jérôme?
26. Have you read another book by Juliet Blackwell? How did it compare to *The Vineyards of Champagne*? Do you see any similar themes in the books?



About JULIET
BLACKWELL

JULIET BLACKWELL is the pseudonym for the *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Lost Carousel of Provence*, *Letters from Paris*, and *The Paris Key*. In addition to writing the beloved Witchcraft Mystery series and the Haunted Home Renovation series, she also coauthored the Agatha Award-nominated Art Lover's Mystery series with her sister.

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