



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JULIET BLACKWELL



THE  
**PARIS**  
SHOWROOM

A NOVEL

*Book Club Kit*



# Dear Readers,

Writing any book based in France usually involves at least some references to World War I and World War II. Even generations later, the aftermath of those terrible years is still evident throughout the cities and the countryside: through the numerous monuments to the dead, the still-visible scars upon the land, and the family stories handed down from those who experienced these terrible wars firsthand.

But when scrolling through a blog describing life in Paris, I read that in 1943, the Nazis had turned a department store in central Paris into a prison camp. None of my French friends, not even the Parisians, had heard of the Lévitán prison camp or the work the prisoners did there. So I started researching, reading, and asking questions.

I was intrigued. Who were these prisoners? What did they eat, where did they sleep, what was their day-to-day life like? What had saved them from immediate deportation to one of the labor and extermination camps in Poland and Germany, the fate of so many others? Did Parisians know that hundreds of French citizens were being held captive and forced to work in Lévitán, a well-known department store located smack-dab in downtown Paris?

War might be waged on a grand scale, but the violence, disruption, and tragedy of war is faced by individuals. *The Paris Showroom* is the story of an estranged mother and daughter who suffer under the Nazi Occupation of Paris in profoundly different ways. It is a story of love denied, fought for, and regained; about shame overcome and one's essential self unveiled. Ultimately, *The Paris Showroom* is the story of the very personal experience of war and what it means to stand up for neighbors and loved ones—or to make the choice not to.

*The Paris Showroom* also touches on the almost magical jazz age in Paris between the world wars, the art and craft of fan making, and the graceful language of fans. Because how could I write a story set in Paris without moments of beauty and joy?

Somehow, writing *The Paris Showroom* during the pandemic made me particularly sensitive to the anxiety and fear that Parisians must have felt during the Occupation. Similarly, it made me acutely aware of how lucky any of us are to have loved ones for support and understanding. I wish us all a happy and healthy future!

Thank you for reading—I hope you get as wrapped up in Capucine’s and Mathilde’s stories as I did!

All my best to you and yours,

Juliet Blackwell



JULIET BLACKWELL is the pseudonym for the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Letters from Paris*, *The Paris Key*, *The Lost Carousel of Provence*, *The Vineyards of Champagne*, and *Off the Wild Coast of Brittany*. 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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# A Conversation

WITH JULIET BLACKWELL

Tell us about *The Paris Showroom*! What inspired you to write this story?

I'm always looking for intriguing historical facts or little tidbits of Paris trivia that lead me off the beaten path. When I learned that a Nazi prison camp had been set up in a department store in central Paris (in fact, there were three camps in Paris, but Lévitán was the largest) I was immediately intrigued.

Most fascinating of all was that none of my French friends had ever heard of the place. How was that possible? Many French citizens, and Parisians in particular, are still coming to grips with what happened under the Nazi Occupation, when some resisted, others collaborated, and many simply tried to survive by remaining neutral. That French citizens were imprisoned within Paris itself is particularly hard to accept. And even after liberation most former Lévitán prisoners remained reticent about their experiences, many feeling a strange kind of guilt at how "good" they had it in comparison to prisoners in places like Auschwitz.

I started pondering what it might have felt like to live in Paris during the Occupation, especially while knowing that a loved one was held prisoner right there in town. The mother, Capucine, was the first character to come to me: she is regretful for many things in her life, and in some ways she feels as though she deserves to be punished. And then Mathilde, Capucine's adult daughter, began to speak to me: though she was not imprisoned, Mathilde experiences life in Paris under Nazi Occupation and faces profound moral choices when it comes to her family, her neighbors, and her own beliefs.

Finally, a love story (or two) emerged because, after all . . . this is Paris!

What do you feel are the main themes/issues that are addressed in *The Paris Showroom*?

The quote at the beginning of the novel reads: *what didn't you do to*

*bury me/but you forgot I was a seed.* As is the case with many stories dealing with trauma, *The Paris Showroom* shows how one can sometimes overcome the harshest of times, and grow stronger and more genuinely oneself in spite of, and because of, that struggle.

At one a point, after a particularly traumatic event, the character named Ezra points out that when one is stripped of everything—not just material possessions but also one’s pride, one’s family, all markers of one’s outer sense of identity—what remains is one’s essence, one’s essential self.

Ultimately, *The Paris Showroom* is a story about figuring out who you really are, and then remaining true to oneself, no matter the cost.

Did the book require any special research? If so, please provide any interesting details about your research.

I wrote much of *The Paris Showroom* while staying at home during the pandemic. This turned out to be the perfect opportunity to write my first purely historical novel—it truly is astonishing what one can find available on the Internet! While I knew that Nazis had looted the belongings of wealthy Jewish families after deporting them to concentration camps, I did not understand the magnitude of the pillage known as Möbel Aktion (Operation Furniture), or that they had actually set up labor camps in Paris itself.

I was especially impressed by the work of Sarah Gensburger, a Parisian researcher and professor who has published about life in the Parisian Nazi camps and who was very generous with her time and knowledge. I should mention that my respect and admiration for my sister—a historian—and all other scholars always grows whenever I do historical research for my novels!

I’m always hungry for the little details: What did the prisoners eat? How did they wash? Did cars have radios in the 1940s? What did people grow in their window boxes? In addition, I learned so much about the interwar era in Paris, the rise of the jazz age, and the treatment of African American GIs in the US military and in France. I kept a steady stream of 1920s Parisian jazz playing in the background while I wrote.

Unfortunately, due to the pandemic I was not able to physically tour the building that housed the former Lévitán department store, but I was able to walk the neighborhood and see the actual building from the outside. It is truly hard to imagine that within, on the top floor, hundreds of people were imprisoned . . . and that they were forced to sort, clean, and stage looted belongings for Nazi commanders and their wives and mistresses to decorate their new Parisian homes, or to be sent back to Germany to enrich those loyal to the Third Reich.

Your most recent books—*Off the Wild Coast of Brittany*, *The Vine-*

*yards of Champagne*, and *The Lost Carousel of Provence* to name a few—all revolve around France in either WWI or WWII. Why France and why this time period?

My partner is French, and we spend several months a year in France. Whenever I'm there, whether in the city or the countryside, I am always struck by how present the world wars still are for those living in today's France. Those wars scarred their lands, sacrificed their relatives, and resulted in myriad stories that are still handed down through the years. It's hard to ignore that kind of tragic and dramatic history when writing a novel based in France, even if one isn't writing about wartime per se.

In a broader sense, there's a simple reason so many stories revolve around wartime: there is a heightened sense of drama during such times of ongoing tragedy. The trauma, the fear, the sacrifices, the hunger, the betrayals, the heartbreak, the loves lost . . . and the loves reclaimed.

How did your writing process change, if at all, while writing this novel?

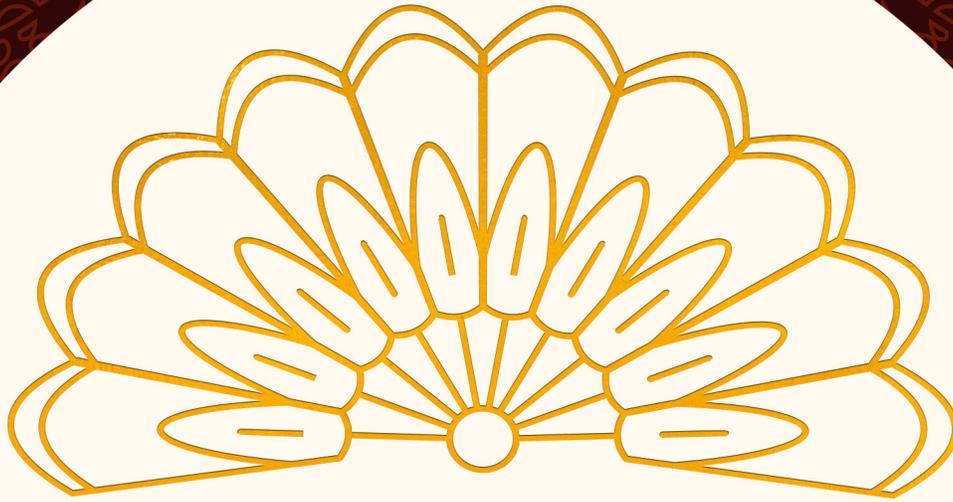
This was my first purely historical fiction; in the past I have gone back and forth between a contemporary story line and a historical story. So, for *The Paris Showroom* I did even more research than normal—so much research! Even though not all readers would notice, it mattered to me to get the details right: Was there hair dye in Paris at that time? What kinds of substitutions were used when coffee and flour and sugar were in short supply? Did the streetcars run on time?

Also, I wanted to explore a mother-daughter relationship in *The Paris Showroom*. In turn, that allowed me to alternate the perspectives of the younger and the older character, the prisoner and the free woman.

What do you hope readers will take away from this story?

A sense of what is important, the need to stand up for what you believe in, and (as corny as it might sound) to look out for your neighbors, even if you don't share their belief systems—perhaps especially if you don't share their belief systems. I think that's a message that all of us could stand to reflect on currently, and as we head into the future.

In her famous poem "Wild Geese," the poet Mary Oliver wrote: "You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves." I think that is the ultimate lesson that both Capucine and Mathilde learn over the course of the *The Paris Showroom*: we must let ourselves love what we love, fully and without regret, no matter what.



# THE *Language of Fans*

According to lore, during the eighteenth century, when freedom of speech for women was greatly curtailed, socialites developed a way to communicate simply by gesturing with their fans. The House of Duvelleroy, a fan maker and retailer founded in Paris in 1827, published a leaflet explaining several of the gestures that made up this secret code:

TOUCHING RIGHT CHEEK: *Yes.*

TOUCHING LEFT CHEEK: *No.*

TWIRLING IN LEFT HAND: *We are watched.*

TWIRLING IN RIGHT HAND: *I love another.*

FANNING SLOWLY: *I am married.*

FANNING QUICKLY: *I am engaged.*

OPEN AND SHUT: *You are cruel.*

OPEN WIDE: *Wait for me.*

PRESENTED SHUT: *Do you love me?*

WITH HANDLE TO LIP: *Kiss me.*

IN RIGHT HAND IN FRONT OF FACE: *Follow me.*

DRAWING ACROSS THE CHEEK: *I love you.*

PLACING ON LEFT EAR: *I wish to get rid of you.*

Sadly for the romantics among us, however, it turns out that this story behind the language of fans might well be apocryphal. In fact, this so-called fan etiquette was invented by the House of Duvelleroy to boost the sale of fans after they had fallen out of fashion following the French Revolution. The pamphlet proved so successful that Duvelleroy became a supplier for Queen Victoria and opened a boutique on London's fashionable New Bond Street.

Still . . . isn't there something delightful about the idea of communicating with no words at all, using only the graceful swish or sudden snap of a fan?



There are many kinds of fans, including:

**Feather**—some of the finest fans in the world are made of precious feathers. Unfortunately, the craze for feathered hats, boas, and fans led to the mass slaughter of endangered birds. These days most feathered fans are made of common plumes—such as chicken feathers—that are dyed or otherwise manipulated to mimic more valuable feathers.

**Starched and folded silk**—these are perhaps the most commonly found fine-quality fans, popular throughout Asia and Europe. The silk is typically starched, folded, and painted and often embellished with lace, ribbons, and gilding.

**Painted and folded paper**—never underestimate the beauty of a simple paper fan. In the hands of a true artisan, paper glued onto stays of wood or bone can be exquisitely painted or intricately cut out to resemble lace.

**Brisé**—these simple, durable fans consist of carved and decorated stays made entirely of wood or bone (or more recently, plastic).

**Stationary**—often about the size and shape of a Ping-Pong paddle, stationary fans do not fold. Often they were attached by a ribbon to one's wrist or skirts, and were typically part of a special outfit, such as a wedding dress.

# Discussion Questions

1. Do you think a work of fiction, such as this novel, is able to illuminate aspects of a historical event that a textbook or a documentary film cannot? If so, in what way?
2. Capucine seems rather passive in the beginning of *The Paris Showroom*, willing to accept her lot in life. Why do you think that was? Did she have other options?
3. Why was Capucine arrested? In what ways did her experience as a political prisoner differ from that of a typical Jewish prisoner?
4. What did the Lévitán department store, the big square house in Neuilly, and La Maison Benoît symbolize in the story? Would be too much to characterize them as “characters” in the novel?
5. Some people find jazz music exhilarating, while others find it annoying or simply boring. What do you think of 1920s jazz? What role did music play in the story?
6. In many big cities, including Paris, the interwar period was a time of social openness, often pushing society’s mores. Why do you think that was? How might that have contributed to the failure to recognize the threat of fascism?
7. *The Paris Showroom* alternates between two stories. Capucine’s unfolds mostly within the department store prison, while Mathilde’s is set in a Parisian suburb and on the streets of Paris. Did you prefer or feel closer to one character’s voice? Why do you think Blackwell chose to tell the story from two perspectives?
8. Many of us become our best selves only after undergoing difficult experiences. How do you think Mathilde’s life might have unfolded had she not experienced the trauma of the war?
9. In what ways does religion shape how the various characters experience and interpret World War II and the Nazi Occupation?

10. For most of the novel we know Charles only through Capucine's memories and his letters. What did he represent for Capucine? In the end, do you think he lived up to her image of him? How do you imagine their relationship might fare over the years?
11. During the Occupation, some Parisians actively collaborated with the Nazis, while many others pretended not to see, or chose not to react to, what was going on around them. What factors do you think influenced individual responses to the Occupation? Had you lived at this time and place, do you think you would have risked your freedom and your life, or those of your children and family, in order to resist?
12. Would you say Bruno and Isedore were morally purer than Capucine?
13. Why did Capucine leave Mathilde with Auguste and Yvette Duplantier and then choose not to be involved in her daughter's upbringing? In your view, was that an understandable choice, given the situation? Was it a forgivable choice?
14. How did Mathilde's friendships with Simone and Bridgette affect her understanding of what was happening in Paris during the Occupation? How did the choices these two friends made shape Mathilde's transition from girlhood to womanhood?
15. How did Mathilde's experiences during the war affect her view of her mother?
16. What role did Madame Antoinette Laurent play in the story?
17. Given Grandpère Auguste's responsibilities to his family and his workers, was it understandable that he collaborated with the Nazis? What do you think happened to Mathilde's grandparents at the end of the novel? Do you think their fate was deserved?
18. Many people are aware of how the Nazis plundered valuable works of art during the war, but fewer have heard of *Möbel Aktion*, or Operation Furniture. What was the significance of the Nazis seizing everything belonging to a family—not just valuable items but also everyday items—as described in *The Paris Showroom*?
19. In your view, which was truer: Capucine's love for Charles or her love for Ezra?
20. Why was ritual so important to the prisoners at the Lévitán department store? Why did those in charge permit the prisoners to celebrate some religious holidays?
21. How would you characterize Abrielle Garnier? Well-intentioned but clueless? Self-centered but not vicious? Something else?

22. What do you think Pettit's backstory is? How would you characterize her relationship with Capucine? Why do you think she did what she did at the end?
23. Do you think Capucine and Mathilde will be able to resurrect La Maison Benoît as a fan-making house? Should they even try?
24. What do you think is the key to Capucine's survival and escape? Pure blind luck? Her unique personality and skills? Being at the right place at the right time?
25. Rare feathers were mentioned only briefly in the book, but it was an article on the topic that gave Blackwell the idea of telling a story involving a fan-making shop. Have you ever given any thought to fans and feathers, and the role they have played in the past? Had you ever heard of "the language of fans"?
26. It's always challenging for an author to use real historical events as a backdrop for a novel—and exciting as well. Given what you know about WWII history, did *The Paris Showroom* ring true for you? What kinds of artistic liberties do you think Blackwell took to bring this novel to life?
27. The novel quotes a poem about love that was written centuries ago and includes the following lines:
- A fearful thing  
to love, to hope, to dream, to be—  
to be,  
And oh, to lose.  
A thing for fools, this  
And a holy thing.*
- What does this poem mean to you?
28. What is the theme of *The Paris Showroom*? Would you say there is a moral to the story?