



## • KNOPF Q & A •

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*A conversation with*

**April Smith**

*author of*

**A STAR FOR MRS. BLAKE**

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**Q: What initially drew you to the story of the American Gold Star Mothers and their pilgrimage to France?**

**A:** I was gripped by the enduring power of motherhood. You never stop being a parent, even after the separation of death. When they boarded those ocean liners for the trip to France, seven thousand ordinary American women left the safety of their everyday worlds in order to touch – however symbolically – their beloved sons who had died in service. Most had never left their home towns; many were immigrants who did not speak English. The courage to undertake that journey was the inspiration for this book. It took twenty years of working the story for me to understand the complexities of what these ladies faced –in the midst of the Depression, a time of deeply rooted ethnic discrimination (blacks were segregated on the pilgrimage), barely a decade after women won the right to vote –but I was compelled to keep going for two reasons: to give voice to those whose sacrifice has been forgotten by history; and to bring to life one of the most compelling, emotional narratives I have ever heard. Also, I do have a wacky side, and the comic potential of five idiosyncratic women with nothing in common, thrown together on an ocean cruise, was irresistible.

**Q: How did you discover the diary of Colonel Thomas Hammond? What prompted you to tell the story from his perspective, as well as from that of the Gold Star mothers?**

**A:** I am actually in possession of the handwritten diary of Colonel Thomas Hammond. It was given to me by his son, Nicholas Hammond, in the hope that I might tell the story of his father. (Nicholas Hammond is an actor/writer/producer, and also a child star in the original film of *THE SOUND OF MUSIC*.) When Nicholas's father, Col. Thomas Hammond, graduated from West Point in 1929, he was given the honor of escorting the Gold Star Mothers pilgrimages. The diary, although brief, provides an ironic firsthand account of what it was like for a good-looking, twenty-four year old trained for combat to suddenly be put in charge of a group of cranky middle-aged women. Col. Thomas Hammond's own father had been a U.S. Army commander, and he was expected to follow, but as a young man Col. Hammond was so affected by his experience on the Gold Star Mothers pilgrimage that he changed tracks, left the infantry, and went on to a distinguished career as a military strategist and diplomat. That's a pretty good character arc.

**Q: Did Colonel Hammond's diary entries help you shape the characters and distinct traits of each of the mothers? Were any of their backgrounds based on true stories?**

**A:** No, the diary is barely a dozen incomplete pages – just an indication of his experience. It's important to emphasize that all the characters except young Hammond are totally fictionalized. Their backgrounds and stories are purely my invention, inspired by material from primary sources including the National Archives, various New England historical societies, numerous reference books, and personal interviews.

**Q: Did you find it difficult to portray the loss of these mothers so vividly?**

**A:** I cried for over a year. I was undergoing my own loss, the death of my father, who had encouraged me to become a writer, and there were times when the rawness of the mothers' grief combined with mine was hard

to bear. In addition, I found myself on a dark journey into the details of what happens on a WWI battlefield when a soldier is blown up by a shell –how the body parts are recovered, identified, reburied. Between studying the burial documents and also the medical procedures of early plastic surgery, I inhabited a subterranean world of human disarticulation. I suppose the entire process was mourning for my father in some way.

**Q: Was one character easier for you to write than the others? Did you begin to identify with one character more than you did with the others?**

**A:** I fell in love with Griffin Reed, the wounded journalist who wears a mask. What better description of the weird isolation of being a writer? I was so happy spending time with him! Those chapters flowed. It was fun to play with the nuts-and-bolts reality of working writers.

**Q: What role do the monuments and geography of France play in the book? Did you spend time in the region in order to describe the pilgrimage as distinctly as you do?**

**A:** Location is huge for me. I travel to every location that appears in my books – from the Dominican Republic to Siena, Italy to Oregon to France. In this case I made a trip to Paris with my son, Benjamin Brayfield, who is a photojournalist, where we traced the pilgrims' itinerary from original documents. We then took a tour of Verdun and the battlefields of the Meuse-Argonne offensive, so I could envision how the action unfolded. It was chilling, but one of the scariest moments was coming upon an overgrown German trench infested with bees, as described when Cora wanders off from her party in *A STAR FOR MRS. BLAKE*.

**Q: How is *A Star for Mrs. Blake* a departure from your past writing?**

**A:** There are many differences. It's not a mystery/thriller, constrained by the requirements of that genre – BUT – hopefully it retains the suspense of a taut drama. Surprising plot developments do abound, and the great thing about a journey is that it has forward momentum, even if it doesn't go where you'd expect. Stylistically, the Ana Grey novels are told in first person; *A STAR FOR MRS. BLAKE* is third person told by an omniscient narrator who takes every character's point of view. This was ultimately enormously liberating, but there was a steep learning curve – as well as the personal challenge of emerging from behind the writer's mask to express my own narrative voice.

**Q: What do you most hope readers will take away from *A Star for Mrs. Blake*?**

**A:** I hope they are thoroughly entertained. That they find the book a wonderful escape, fall in love with the characters and are blissfully transported to another world they never want to leave. Also that as a result of going on this journey they are moved to see things differently. I think the book raises important questions about our responsibility as parents and citizens when it comes to acceptance of violence and involvement in war. Many of the mothers in this book – rightfully proud of their sons' service –wonder still if they could have/should have stopped them from enlisting. How far can the bonds of family go? How deeply can we hope to influence our children? I'd like to hear from readers, and contemporary Gold Star Mothers, especially.

**Q: Do you have a specific writing routine? How was the process of writing *A Star for Mrs. Blake* different than your past novels (if at all)?**

**A:** *A STAR FOR MRS. BLAKE* found its seed in historical facts, but the process of turning those facts into a dramatic narrative was the same as with the Ana Grey novels and even my scripts. I go out into the field, take notes and pictures, meet random people, talk to experts and just wander; let the senses do their work and then come home and make something out of the pieces. My subjects are reality-based, kind of like a Rauschenberg collage, if I may be so bold. Technically, I'm an outliner. I have a white board on which I throw up ideas and look at the big picture. Gradually those thoughts get winnowed down to story beats and chapters. I've also learned it's essential to do detailed biographies of the main characters. But there's a large component of discovery, and obviously, subconscious process that you can't control or predict – and that's the gold.