

The Enigma Affair
Book Club Guide

Including a letter from author Charlie Lovett, a Q&A with Charlie Lovett, suggested questions for discussion, and additional resources for your book club meeting or personal reflection.

Dear Readers,

In the 1990s I met a woman named Mavis Batey at a Lewis Carroll conference and the two of us became friends. Mavis had lived in Carroll's college, Christ Church, Oxford, for many years when her husband was the college steward and had even written the standard guidebook to Lewis Carroll's Oxford. I was a little starstruck when we first met—everyone in the Carroll world had a copy of that lovely guidebook. Years later I discovered that I should have been a lot more starstruck. During World War II Mavis had worked at Bletchley Park, the code-breaking center outside London where people like Alan Turing and Gordon Welchman broke the German Enigma code. Mavis had been a brilliant mathematician and code breaker and had performed essential work in breaking Enigma, but, because she had signed the official secrets acts promising not to talk about her war work for fifty years, I only got her to talk about her Bletchley experiences one time.

Because of my friendship with Mavis, I became fascinated with Enigma and visited Bletchley Park on multiple occasions. I found the stories of the heroic work done there endlessly fascinating. They opened up a whole window on history for me that I think is opening for many of us as we learn about things that were kept secret for so long. The museum now at Bletchley helped me understand the massive non-military part of the war that proved so important to Allied victory. Much of that non-military war—intelligence, counterintelligence, and so much more—was waged by women like Mavis. They sacrificed for their country and then went back to their lives after the war. They received no medals or citations. They couldn't even tell their husbands or families about their heroism.

All this made me want to write a novel in honor of the work that Mavis and so many others did to defend freedom during World War II. That began *The Enigma Affair*, a thriller about a small-town librarian and a professional assassin who team up to solve a 75-year-old Nazi mystery—a mystery that begins with an un-decoded Enigma message. My heroine, Patton Harcourt, is, like

Mavis, much more than she seems. She has secrets and has made sacrifices, and she is willing to put her life on the line for the sake of others. Readers have told me that *The Enigma Affair*, with its unexpected twists and turns, feels like a rollercoaster ride. I hope that's true. I wrote it to be a fun, fast-paced read. But I also hope as you read, and when you finish, you'll pause to think about all those whose contributions to freedom we may never know.

Happy Reading,
Charlie Lovett

Q & A with Charlie Lovett, author of *The Enigma Affair*

What was your seed of inspiration for *The Enigma Affair*?

My friend Mavis Batey, whom I discussed in the letter above, was the first inspiration for this novel. Knowing how essential the work she did was to the war effort and how she kept that work secret for fifty years inspired me to write a thriller in her honor—a story with Bletchley Park and the defeat of Nazism as part of its background. On one of my visits to Bletchley, a docent informed me that the museum has thousands of un-decoded Enigma messages in their archives. This gave me the entry point into my story. What if, I thought, one of those messages was still vitally important seventy-five years later—so important that people would kill for it? That question led me into the story of *The Enigma Affair*. Of course, before I could get too far into the story, I had to know what that message would say, and discovering that took me to the central mystery of the book.

What did your research process look like?

Though most of the action takes place in 2015, *The Enigma Affair* has its background in World War II, so it was important to get those details right. Trips to Bletchley Park played an especially important role, as they helped me not only to learn the details of how the British broke the Enigma code but also to see and hear and smell the machines they used to do it. I knew that Henrich Himmler would be one of the major characters in the background story, so I read transcripts of his speeches and details about his obsession with the occult (all of the strangest things Himmler does

in the book he actually did in real life). I also stumbled onto some gems by accident. At an exhibition in New York, I saw a medieval alchemical scroll. Knowing that alchemy would play a role in the novel, I decided I would incorporate such a scroll into my story. I found an article about a collector of Nazi artifacts that led me to create the character of Alex Lansdowne. Another aspect of my research was simply getting the details of many different places in Europe correct. Since I was not able to travel to every place my heroes went to, I used Google Earth and Google Street view to get a feel for neighborhoods, villages, and even the alpine meadows near the Brenner Pass.

How did you create your two protagonists, Patton and Nemo?

I knew I wanted this to be a “buddy” adventure. Although many other characters join the “team” with Patton and Nemo, it is, at its heart, their story. I thought it would be fun to make these two characters seem, at first, to have absolutely nothing in common—we begin knowing only that one is a small-town librarian and the other is a professional assassin. But relationships are often about the process of discovering that we are not as different from one another as we might at first think, and I liked the idea of Patton and Nemo slowly growing to respect each other and eventually forming this unlikely friendship. I wanted them both to be damaged, because we are all damaged in one way or another and I find damaged characters so interesting. And, in a way, it is their damage that ultimately brings them together.

What made you want to write a thriller?

I’ve always enjoyed thrillers, both on the page and on the screen. I read Ken Follet and Frederick Forsyth when I was younger (there is even a shout out to Follet in *The Enigma Affair*). I loved the idea of creating a roller coaster ride for my readers—but a ride like Space Mountain, a rollercoaster in the dark where you can’t see the twists and turns coming. It is so much fun to create those moments when a reader says, “I didn’t see that coming!” I think a good mystery or thriller is, in many ways, a pact between the author and the reader. As the author I promise to leave you clues but also to misdirect you. As a reader, you promise to guess what will happen. But the wonderful thing about that pact is we both understand that, secretly, the reader wants to be wrong. It’s much more fun to be surprised than to be smug, and I love being able to deliver that surprise to the reader.

Suggested Questions for Discussion

1) How do the first sentence and the first scene of the novel suggest to the reader what is to come? What questions do you have about Patton after just a few paragraphs that will be answered later in the novel?

2) The character of Jasper Fleming is only in the novel briefly. In what ways does Jasper hover over the rest of the novel, long after his own death? How do you think the presence of Jasper affects Patton's behavior as she meets the various challenges that arise? Do you think it is an effective story-telling device to kill off a character so early in the narrative?

3) In what ways do some of the characters in this novel occupy a moral gray area? The characters of Henrich Himmler and Nemo are both murderers, but how do you respond to them differently as a reader? In what ways are you able to relate to and cheer for Nemo, in spite of his chosen profession? Is Nemo morally justified in what he does to the two Germans who are chasing him and Patton? Why or why not?

4) Alex Lansdowne never says exactly why he collects Nazi artifacts, other than that he is driven to collect something. Can you justify his collecting of Nazi memorabilia? What is the difference between a collection that seeks to preserve history so that we don't repeat it and one which glorifies Nazism?

5) Charlie Lovett has said he learned the essential elements of the thriller from watching Alfred Hitchcock movies and listening to interviews with Hitchcock himself. What do you think makes a thriller and how do the classic elements of the thriller weave their way through *The Enigma Affair*?

6) Why is pacing so important in a thriller? How does the author vary the pacing in different parts of the story and what effect does this have on your experience of the novel. Can you compare

the pacing of the novel to that of a motion picture? Do you see other cinematic elements in *The Enigma Affair*?

7) For those readers who have also read Lovett's novel *The Bookman's Tale*, what was it like to re-encounter Peter Byerly twenty years after the action of that novel? Authors often refer to this type of reference to another work as an "Easter Egg." Do you think Easter Eggs add to the enjoyment of a novel or do they take you out of the world that is being created?

8) There is a lot in this novel about code-breaking, in particular the breaking of the German Enigma code. How does the author incorporate this information in a way which is useful to the reader without being overly confusing or slowing down the story?

9) One way to create excitement and tension in a thriller is for the author to ask the question, "What's the worst thing that could happen?" Then the author writes that thing and sees how the characters respond to the new, worse, situation. Can you spot places in *The Enigma Affair* where the author found things that could go wrong for his characters? How did that raise the tension in the story?

10) The two main characters in *The Enigma Affair* suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. How does that effect the reader's experience of the story? How do Nemo and Patton react differently to PTSD?

11) In the relationship between Patton and Ruthie it can be hard to discern who is using whom. How did your ideas about their relationship change during the course of the novel? At any point did you think they might end up together? Did you feel different about the way Patton manipulated Ruthie after you discovered what Ruthie had done?

12) In what ways are some of the issues surrounding World War II and Nazi Germany made relevant to today's world in the novel? How does Ingrid Weiss as a villain parallel Henrich Himmler? In what ways is she different? How does Weiss's personal behavior reflect her world view?

Further Reading & Resources

[Bletchley Park](#)—For readers who live in or visit England, I highly recommend a visit to Bletchley Park, where the British effort to break Axis codes was based. The site is now an excellent museum, where you will see, among many other sites, real Enigma machines and more information about my friend Mavis Batey.

[Click here](#) to read Charlie Lovett's article on the *Crime Reads* website about making World War II relevant in a contemporary thriller.

[Click here](#) for Mary Berry's recipe for profiteroles—she puts chocolate ganache on the outside and cream on the inside, but Patton would approve.

[Click here](#) to watch an interview with Charlie Lovett in which he discusses *The Enigma Affair* or [click here](#) to listen to Anne Bogel (a.k.a. The Modern Mrs. Darcy) interview Charlie about the book on the podcast *Inside the Writer's Studio*.