Table of Contents

Discussion Questions 3
About the Author 6
Interview with April Smith 7
On April's Writing Inspiration: Her Father 9
The Lieutenant's Diary 12
Book Club Discussion Questions

http://knopfdoubleday.com/guide/9780307948809/a-star-for-mrs-blake/

1. The Gold Star Mother’s group was founded after World War I. Why was President Herbert Hoover so eager to pass legislation to fund these pilgrimages? Was there more to it than wanting to honor the fallen soldiers and their mothers.

2. Consider the Gold Star Mothers in Party A featured in April Smith’s book. How would you characterize their relationship with one another? How are the women different? How are they similar? What tensions are evident between them and what is at the root of these problems?

3. The parents of each soldier had the choice of whether to inter their son’s remains in America or in France. What was behind Cora Blake’s ultimate decision to have her son interred in France? Do you think she was at peace with that decision?

4. What cultural issues does the mix-up of Wilhelmina Russell and Selma Russell expose? There is documentation that some “Negro mothers” would not go on the trip when they found out they wouldn’t be treated as equals to the “white mothers.” Do you agree with these mothers’ decisions not to go?

5. What does Smith mean when she writes of war and “the democracy of death” (page 22)? What examples are found in the book?

6. How are the mothers treated in America? How are they received in France? What does this seem to indicate about international opinions of America’s role in the war?

7. While much of the focus of the story is on the physical and emotional journey of each of the Gold Star Mothers, what kind of journeys do Lieutenant Thomas Hammond and Nurse Lily undertake? How do they change from the start of the pilgrimage to its conclusion? What causes these changes?

8. The book features several expatriate characters. Does Smith indicate why these Americans are living in France? What kinds of occupations do they have? What do they
share in common? What do these characters suggest about postwar living in Europe? Who are some real-life expatriates and how do they compare with Smith’s expatriates?

9. The tension between Clancy Hayes and Griffin Reed helps to illuminate issues of ethics, propaganda, and the role of the press in determining how war is presented. How does each journalist approach the task of writing about war and its effects? Why does Reed have such a problem with Hayes? How is Reed’s version of the story of the Gold Star Mothers different than Hayes’s version? What is the overall effect of the article Reed writes? How is it received? Why is this important?

10. There are different ideas about war expressed by the book’s characters: the mothers, the journalists, Nurse Lily, and Lieutenant Hammond. What are those ideas and how do they compare? How does General Perkins’s point of view affect our understanding of the issues at hand? Who do you sympathize with the most?

11. American expatriate journalist Griffin Reed wears a mask because of his severe disfigurement, but this mask may also be interpreted as a symbol of secrets, the inner self, and the emotional masks we all wear. What secrets do each of the characters keep? Is one more surprising than another? Why is Cora’s telling of her story to Reed so important? Does he keep her secret? How do the characters react to the revelation or discovery of each other’s secrets?

12. What part does legacy play in the book? Cora says that her family’s military involvement dates back to the time of the Revolutionary War. Perkins is from an army family, as is Lieutenant Hammond. How do tradition and the will to break from tradition feature as themes of the book? Consider Minnie Seibert’s reaction to the young woman on the bus. Why is Minnie so disgruntled by the young woman’s initial response to her?

13. Each of the female characters is confronted with her own personal choices. What do their situations tell us collectively about the role of women during this time? Do the women change throughout the story, or do they continue to adhere to societal norms and roles?

14. Evaluate the motif of pilgrimage in the book. How is a pilgrimage different from a trip? How does this categorization tie the book in with a greater thread in American history?
What does this tell us about common experience? What common plights and challenges do all pilgrims face and how do they surmount these?

15. Discuss the treatment of faith in the book. What examples of faith are found throughout? Besides religious faith, what other kinds of faith are depicted? Which characters experience a loss of their faith or a conflict of faith? Do they ever regain their faith? If so, how? At the conclusion of the book, what do the characters seem to find faith in?

16. Many of the characters exhibit a strong sense of duty at one time or another. Does this change throughout the story? Is duty to something always external? Or are there any examples in the story of duty to one’s self?

17. Griffin Reed says that Cora worries over “what a war mother is really supposed to do” (274). Is this question answered by the end of the book? How does Smith’s story change or confirm your own ideas about duty and sacrifice?

18. A Star for Mrs. Blake is anchored in a footnote of history. The book is inspired by a diary of a real-life American colonel and Gold Star Mother liaison officer, but the story is from the author’s imagination. Discuss the role of truth and accuracy in historical fiction. What other books can this one be likened to? What do these books indicate about war and its effects and the way that we view them? What can a reader take away from reading about events in a novel rather than in a history book?

19. Nelson DeMille, author of Word of Honor, said, “Everyone who has served or is serving in the military, and also their families and friends, should read this book.” Why do you think he suggests this and do you agree?
April Smith is the author of the successful novels featuring FBI Special Agent Ana Grey as the central character. She is also an Emmy-nominated television writer and producer. In her research for *A Star for Mrs. Blake*, she traveled to Maine, New York City, Paris, Verdun, and the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery. She is the mother of a grown son and daughter. Her home base is Santa Monica, California, where she lives with her husband.
Interview with April Smith

Taking readers to a world that existed generations ago is quite the difficult task, especially for an author whose key means of researching the stories she tells involves physically visiting to locations set in her books.

In “A Star For Mrs. Blake,” Santa Monica author April Smith takes her readers to a time in between two of the biggest wars the world has ever engaged.

Set in the 1930s, “A Star For Mrs. Blake” tells the story of five American women who travel to Paris to visit the respective graves of their sons, all soldiers who died in World War I. It is a story of a life-changing pilgrimage.

She spoke with The Mirror about the book.

With "A Star For Mrs. Blake," what was your process to take readers back to the 1930s?

The facts of the Gold Star Mothers pilgrimages came from original source material I researched at the National Archives. The War Department kept precise records of the itineraries of the tours, including hotels and schedules for every city they visited, as well as daily reports on the women’s well being. For the writing style, I immersed myself in 1930s literature as well as first person interviews with women who lived during the depression recorded by the Maine Folklore Center.

What does the story tell us about the people alive in that era? Does any part of the story apply to our lives today? What do you hope readers takeaway from this story?

The story of mothers losing children to war is timeless, with special poignancy now, given our involvement in multiple wars overseas. Women alive in that era had far less political power than today and were cast in the supporting role of the grieving parent – certainly not as policy maker or president of a country. Hopefully readers will be moved by the difference between then and now and understand the courage it took for those Gold Star Mothers to embark on an unknown journey.

You are so thorough in how you bring your story to life, what with visiting the places you right about, talking to the locals, taking photos, and outlining everything on a whiteboard. How much of April Smith’s experience in these locales are in your stories?
Beyond seeing the story through your eyes, how much of the story, if any of it, is your story?

It is my personal story as the mother of two children. Like every parent, I experienced the intimacy of childhood and the difficulty of separation as they grow, although thankfully not as dramatically as the women in this book. It’s my story as an ordinary person who has been through loss and grief as well as the affirmation of love.

Many years from now when someone goes through all of your works, what is the common denominator? What is the one theme that emerges from all of your work combined?

That’s for the graduate students of the world to figure out. I do tend to speak out for the underdog; for those who submit to power because they don’t believe they have a voice.

Looking back, what has resonated with the most in your writing career, either professionally or personally? Of all you have seen and wrote about, has anything stood out to you more than anything else?

Respect for professionals who do their jobs with integrity, whether they’re FBI agents, cops, baseball scouts, lobstersmen or just plain terrific moms and dads.

Lastly, please feel free to share any of your background. Your roots, your journey, your aspirations, your family?

I learned everything I know from growing up in the Bronx.
I wish you could have met my dad, Philip H. Smith, M.D.. A New Yorker to the soul, he was the kind of guy who could talk to anyone. He grew up in the Bronx when it was just empty lots where neighborhood kids roasted potatoes over an open fire. He attended Clinton High School and NYU — and although he didn't believe in God and practiced no religion, he suffered discrimination due to the quota system against Jews applying to medical schools. He persevered, and began a general practice on the Grand Concourse when he was still too young to have a moustache. (He borrowed my mother’s mascara to fill his in.) He served as a Captain in the Army medical corps during WWII and was one of the first to use the new drug, penicillin . . . and he taught me to write.

Dad had published in student newspapers and little magazines, and his poems were anthologized in The Yearbook for Modern Poetry 1939, but the breakthrough was publishing a short story in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, the citadel of speculative fiction, which was always his first love.

He was a natural storyteller, and my fondest memories are of my father coming home for an afternoon break from the office when my mother was still at work, and share them with me. He’d fix himself a snack of herring and crackers with a cup of Lipton tea, which he’d enjoy while reading a book tenuously propped up against whatever was handy. I would be doing my homework, which he would pleasantly interrupt by lying on my bed and spontaneously improvising science fiction stories.
My parents had a substantial library which included shelves of Ballantine paperbacks and no doubt these were riffs on stuff he’d read – A.E. Van Vogt, Isaac Asimov, Frederik Pohl, Philip K. Dick, Poul Anderson and the rest of the canon. I was entranced by the jacket art as much the plots – those haunting abstract surreal images of globules becoming faces while doomed rocket ships fell from scarlet skies took me to the ‘outer limits’ of imagination, which my father thought was a perfectly appropriate place for a nine year-old mind.

My first literary efforts were imitations of Ray Bradbury, whose books I discovered in the tiny public library perched above a dry cleaners on Kingsbridge Road in the Bronx. I’d hole up in my pink and white room, carefully typing on my beloved Olympus, emerging with pages I’d show to my dad. He was a sharp and intuitive editor. He taught me to write lean sentences. He hated “padding” in fiction and expertly revised my short stories in hasty blue ink – then – and this is pretty whacky – encouraged me to send them to The New Yorker. I was barely out of elementary school, but already initiated into the world of grown-up writers, who knew how to properly submit a manuscript with an SASE and their name on every page, although I doubt many kissed their envelopes for good luck before dropping them into dark maw of the corner post box. Soon I had a cookie tin full of rejection slips. But the lasting effect of working with my father was powerful. He never criticized or judged. He took me into his world, and took mine seriously.

Meanwhile Dad was pounding away at his own originals on the Royal, which he’d set up on the kitchen table on Sundays. One of these was about a doctor who discovers he can cure people just by touching them – a talent which quickly takes a very nasty turn. The editors of Fantasy and Science Fiction suggested that he collaborate with the prolific Alan E. Nourse, also a physician, and “A Miracle Too Many,” appeared in the September, 1964 issue. It was anthologized in the 10th Annual Edition of The Year's Best S-F edited by Judith Merrill, along with work by Isaac Bashevis Singer, Arthur C. Clark, and John D. MacDonald. The original issue, which sold for forty cents, became in icon of success for me and my brother, Ronald L. Smith, also a writer.

“When it first began, Dr. Stephen Olie’s curious gift appeared in the manner of most true miracles, insidiously and without fanfare . . . “
Dad soldiered on with his practice along with solitary hours at the Royal. In 1979 he published a memoir, Doctor! about ministering to the immigrants in our old neighborhood. When the Grand Concourse went downhill and doctors were being robbed by drug addicts, he closed his office and took a job at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Montrose, New York, which provided material for his second nonfiction book, All Patients Sick and Crazy. According to the jacket copy (written by my brother), “This makes One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest look tame. One lovesick patient gives the nurse the eye – taking his glass eye right out of the socket!”

Philip H. Smith, M.D. died at the age of 94 on December 6, 2011 but his love and encouragement are present for me every day. Always the sweetest moment of publication was giving Dad a copy of a new book that I’d written, and watching him marvel at the printed pages. He knew what went into every word, but he was far from sentimental. Once I told him about a particularly generous advance and he said, “You know you’ll have to pay taxes on that.” No matter, he was proud, and then came the words I lived to hear: “Honey, that’s terrific!”
Inspired by a real-life diary from 1932, a crime writer follows five mothers on a pilgrimage to visit the graves of their sons.

In his clothbound daybook dated summer 1932, Lieutenant Thomas Hammond described escorting five American women across the Atlantic Ocean to visit their sons’ graves in France. The US War Department sponsored more than 1,300 of these “pilgrimages of remembrance” between 1930 and 1933 to honor widows and mothers of soldiers who had died in World War I. Though the program was short-lived, Hammond’s family kept the diary, which his son shared with his friend April Smith (CAS’71), a television writer and producer. Smith thought the mothers’ journey “was just the most compelling story in the world”—but it would take her more than 20 years to find the right way to tell it.

“I was writing a lot of movies of the week at the time, so I was trying to pitch it in that arena,” she says. “The genre was really current crime stories based on tabloid headline stories about women killing their husbands, setting their pants on fire—that kind of thing.” Historical drama did
not fit in with this sensationalist programming, and in the years before cable television emerged, there were no alternatives.

Smith shelved the idea and moved on to write and produce several hit television series, including *Cagney & Lacey*, the first crime show to feature two female leads. To immerse herself in the world of police detectives, she accompanied New York cops on ride-alongs and became addicted to “the visceral experience of pulling up in a squad car somewhere on 42nd Street, with a big crowd gathered, and running with the cops and not knowing what you were going to find,” she says in an interview for literary website Identity Theory. “Running [through] a doorway and up these dingy stairs with a trail of blood on them and, at the top of the stairs, who knew what you would find? That adrenaline rush stayed with me.” Adrenaline-fueled, character-driven plots became Smith’s trademark both in her television work and her popular mystery thrillers starring Ana Grey, an FBI special agent who lives “aggressively without God” and works hundred-hour weeks to advance a career plan “so tight you could plot it on graph paper.”

Throughout four Ana Grey novels, a stand-alone thriller starring a female baseball scout, and numerous television series, Smith could not shake the account of the pilgrimages, convinced that the story needed to be told, if she could only find the right way to tell it. She was under contract to write the fifth Ana Grey thriller when a profound personal loss led her back to the war mothers at last.

Smith’s father had always wanted to be a writer. He had worked for his college literary magazine, published a science fiction short story, and written two nonfiction books about his career as a doctor in the Bronx, but his fiction-writing dreams took a back seat to his medical profession. He would come home from the office at three o’clock, around the same time Smith finished school. They would have a snack, and then he would lie across her bed with his tie draped over his eyes and tell her science fiction stories. Though he repurposed plots from paperbacks and movies, he had a natural flair for storytelling and inspired his daughter to write. “Because he was so naïve and sweet, he encouraged me to send stories to real magazines like *Fantasy & Science Fiction* and the *New Yorker*—and that was when I was eight!”

When her father passed away, Smith was devastated. “I experienced deep, abiding grief for the first time,” she says. “When you lose someone that important to you, you spend months feeling groundless.” Her husband, a psychotherapist, suggested it was time to write about the
pilgrimages of remembrance. Smith was “emotionally with these war mothers” and began to write a book about their journey without telling her editor, who was expecting an Ana Grey novel in six months.

Strangers at the start, the five mothers of *A Star for Mrs. Blake* have nothing in common but the fact that their sons were killed while serving in the Yankee Division of the American Expeditionary Forces. The women become mixed up in a murder, uncover army secrets, and say good-bye to their sons. Before the characters could embark on their journey, however, Smith needed to make the pilgrimage first.

“I always go to every place I write about, and that includes the Dominican Republic or Dodger Stadium in the winter,” she says. She visited the National Archives to study the original military records, which documented the pilgrimages in detail. Each of the nearly 7,000 women who made the voyage across the Atlantic had an individual itinerary so specific that Smith discovered where they stayed and where they had tea. She re-created their pilgrimage route to France and toured the Verdun battlefield, “where you can still see the shell craters in the buildings.” Along the way, she visited the hotels and cafés, and though “the buildings weren’t always there, at least I could be in the same spot. That’s where imagination comes in.”

It was equally important for Smith to know the mothers making the pilgrimage, and she traveled to each woman’s New England hometown. Her main character, Cora, is the librarian in the small fishing village of Stonington, Maine, where Smith had rented houses for many summers. Researching Cora’s character “was like going home. All I needed to do was soak up the atmosphere, walk in the rain, talk to people, eat the food, and just take it in.” She interviewed the locals about their grandparents’ lives as farmers and lobstermen and met “a lady who was 104 years old and sharp as a tack. She told me great stories”—which Smith won’t reveal because “it’s all in the book.” Though Cora’s life in the 1930s would have been different from the lives of modern Maine residents, “some things don’t change,” Smith says. “Being a mother doesn’t change. I think I could write that character in any time period.”

When it came time to send the manuscript to her editor at Knopf, Smith was nervous, “especially when I didn’t hear from Knopf for three weeks. I’ve been working with them for over 20 years, so we’re all on the same team, but publishing is a business, and I was going outside the lines. It was a huge risk.” In a remarkable coincidence, editor Carole Baron had just bought
a photograph of war mothers from the 1930s because “they touched her heart the way they touched mine,” Smith says. Baron bought the novel. Now, more than 20 years after Smith read Hammond’s diary, and 80 years after the last pilgrimage, *A Star for Mrs. Blake* will be published in January 2014.