

### The Reading Guide

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#### Reading Group Questions

1. 'In the picture book of marriage, they were the perfect married couple. It was a story told for an audience.' (p.54) What does this extract tell us about Sonia and James's relationship? What changes between them as the novel progresses? Is James a villain? What tactics does he employ to control Sonia?
2. Compare the representations of contemporary Spain and Britain in the book's first two chapters. How do the two countries differ? How does the Britain of 2001 compare with the pre-war version portrayed at the end of the book?
3. Why are music and dance so important to the characters in *The Return*? What does the way a character dances say about them and their relationships? Why is Sonia so drawn to flamenco in particular, and why does James disapprove of her dance classes so vehemently?
4. 'We need real men in this country ... Spain will never be strong while it's full of poofers' (p.211). What image of masculinity do the Ramírez males – and the other men in the book – present? How does masculinity differ in Spain and England? Is maleness portrayed as a good or bad thing? How do women exert their power?
5. Did you identify any family traits that ran through the Ramírez generations? Does Sonia take after her father or her mother, or any of her other relations?
6. 'For Ignacio, there was a distinction between what he regarded as being a casual informer and actually being an assassin' (p.240). Why does Ignacio make this distinction? Is it an accurate one? Where else in the novel are we invited to compare physical violence with more subtle forms of cruelty?
7. 'The saints and martyrs with their painted on blood and theatrical stigmata had once been part of her life. Now she saw the church as a sham, a cupboard full of redundant props' (p.302). Why does Mercedes lose her faith? How does *The Return* portray religion and particularly the Catholic Church?
8. What does this book have to say about friendship? Is blood thicker than water?
9. 'The lack of truth in [Concha and Mercedes'] correspondence did not mean there was no love between them. It merely meant that they loved each other enough to want to protect the other party' (p.441). Who else withholds information in the novel, and why? What is the role of these secrets or non-disclosures? How do they affect the plot?

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10. What did you make of Javier and Mercedes' relationship? Is it a childish infatuation, a survival tactic, a 'fathomless love' (p.455), or what?
11. What does *The Return* have to say about politics? To what extent does it affect real life? Did you detect a political bias to this book? If so, what is it?
12. What is the relevance of bull fighting in *The Return*? Does it tell us anything about Spanish culture or the Civil War more generally? Is it relevant that Republican citizens are assassinated in Granada's bullring (p.212) and that Ignacio is hunted and killed like a bull (p.243)? If so, why?
13. How does the history of the Ramírez family represent the Spanish Civil War more generally? Do you find their story a good way of conveying the history of the Civil War? Is Victoria Hislop successful in melding fact and fiction together?
14. 'Antonio discovered that there was nothing more brutalising than to drive a bayonet into another human being and in this killing he felt part of himself die too' (p.360). How does Antonio's perspective on killing compare to Ignacio's, and to other characters'? Were you surprised by the novel's violence? How does Victoria Hislop treat the subject of death in her writing?
15. Whose story did you enjoy most? Did the different strands hang well together, do you think?
16. 'On his outstretched hand lay nothing more than a small mound of dirt, a pathetic sample of Spain's soil that he had brought with him over the mountains' (p.372). What does this old man's gesture tell us about the emigrant experience? How do other characters in the book think about exile and home?
17. If you have read *The Island*, what similarities and differences did you identify between the two novels? Are there any plot and structure devices common to both? How do the two heroines, Sonia and Alexis, compare?

### About the Book

Sonia and James are in trouble. Despite the perfect wedding, the big house in Wandsworth and the weekends in the country, they have grown as distant under the surface as their well-heeled friends. James is drinking too much and Sonia seeks escape in her weekly dance lessons.

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So when Maggie, Sonia's oldest friend, announces that she is whisking Sonia off to celebrate her birthday in Granada, Sonia doesn't demur. In Spain the girls learn the rhythm of salsa and the raw passion of flamenco, and by night practise their new skills in the local bars. It is while Maggie is sleeping off her hangover that Sonia wanders the backstreets and discovers a quiet café, El Barril, and its friendly old bartender, Miguel. Over several visits and café con leche, the two strike up an unlikely friendship. Sonia is intrigued by old photographs of a beautiful flamenco dancer displayed on the wall, and Miguel embarks on the extraordinary tale behind them, of a family's fight to survive the horror of Spain's civil war...

Seventy years earlier and Granada, under a new liberal government, is a place of freedom and optimism. In the Ramírez family's café, Concha and Pablo's children relish an atmosphere of hope. Antonio is a serious young socialist teacher, Ignacio a handsome and flamboyant matador, and Emilio a gentle soul and skilled musician. Their sister, Mercedes, has a talent for flamenco. When she meets Javier Montero, a famous young gypsy guitarra, she persuades him to play for her. Her dancing astounds Javier, and they fall deeply in love.

But Spain is a country in turmoil, and in 1936 a revolution begins that will tear their family apart. As Antonio is lured into battle, Mercedes resolves to go in search of Javier and embarks on a journey that will take her through war-ravaged Spain and ultimately to the safe shores of Britain. It is here, many years later, that she meets a new dance partner and begins a life that Sonia discovers is more relevant to her than she ever could have envisaged...

**Further Reading**

*For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway

*Homage to Catalonia* by George Orwell

*As I Walked out one Midsummer Morning* by Laurie Lee

*The Shadow of the Wind* by Carlos Ruiz Zafón

*Winter in Madrid* by C.J. Sansom

*Captain Corelli's Mandolin* by Louis de Bernier

*Suite Française* by Irene Nemirovsky

*Charlotte Gray* by Sebastian Faulks

*House of Orphans* by Helen Dunmore

*Yerma* by Federico García Lorca

*The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* by Anthony Beevor

*Ghosts of Spain: Travels Through a Country's Hidden Past* by Giles Tremlett

*A Parrot in the Pepper Tree* by Chris Stewart

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**Background Information****The Spanish Civil War**

The Civil War devastated Spain from July 1936 to April 1939. On one side were supporters of the liberal-socialist Republic, generally comprised of urban workers, peasants and much of the educated middle class; on the other were the rebel nacionales, made up of the majority of the Catholic clergy and practicing Catholics, important elements of the army, most of the large landowners, and many businessmen. International backing for the Republicans came primarily from the Soviet Union and Mexico, and for the Nationalists from the major European Axis powers, namely Italy, Germany, and neighbouring Portugal. The war ended in 1939 with the victory of the Nationalist rebels and the founding of a dictatorship led by General Francisco Franco that lasted until his death in 1975.

The war increased tensions in the lead-up to the Second World War and became in some cases a world war by proxy, with Germany in particular using Spain as a rehearsal for many of the blitzkrieg tactics it later used in the war in Europe. The advent of the mass media allowed an unprecedented level of attention (Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell and Robert Capa all covered it) and so the war became notable for the passion and political division it inspired, and for atrocities committed on both sides of the conflict. At least 50,000 people were executed during the Civil War, and even afterwards Franco continued to issue harsh reprisals against his former enemies. Anthony Beevor estimates that this 'white terror' claimed a further 200,000 lives. Many others were put to forced labour, building railways, drying out swamps, digging canals and constructing Franco's infamous Valle de los Caídos monument. Hundreds of thousands of other Republicans fled abroad, especially to France and Mexico.

**Federico García Lorca**

Frederico García Lorca, poet, dramatist, painter, pianist and composer, was born into a family of minor but wealthy landowners on 5 June 1898. In 1909 the family moved to Granada where in time García Lorca became deeply involved in local artistic circles. In 1919 he went to study in Madrid where he befriended Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí, among many others who were or would become influential artists in Spain. Towards the end of the 1920s, however, García Lorca fell victim to increasing depression brought about largely by his anguish over his homosexuality. The recent success of his play *Mariana Pineda* and poetry collections seemed to emphasise the painful dichotomy of his life: he was trapped between the persona of the successful author, which he was forced to maintain in public, and the tortured self, which he could only acknowledge in private.

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After a brief spell in New York García Lorca returned to Spain in 1930 where he toured with a student theatre company acting, directing and writing his most famous works: *Bodas de Sangre*, *Yerma* and *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*. In 1936 he returned to the conservative city of Granada just three days before civil war broke out. García Lorca and his brother-in-law, the socialist mayor of Granada, were soon arrested. He was killed, shot by Nationalist militia on 19 August 1936 and thrown into an unmarked grave. Significant controversy remains about the motives and details of his death although many believe that homophobia played a role. The dossier compiled at Franco's request has yet to surface. The Franco regime placed a general ban on García Lorca's work and it was not until Franco's death in 1975 that García Lorca's life and death could be openly discussed in Spain. Today, García Lorca is honored by a statue prominently located in Madrid's Plaza de Santa Ana. Political philosopher David Crocker reports that 'the statue, at least, is still an emblem of the contested past: each day, the Left puts a red kerchief on the neck of the statue, and someone from the Right comes later to take it off.'

**About the Author**

Victoria Hislop was born in Kent and grew up in Tonbridge. She read English at St Hilda's College, Oxford, and later worked in book publishing and then in public relations.

When she became a mother in 1990, it was the catalyst for a change of career and she began working as a freelance journalist, specialising in features on parenting and education. When one of the magazines she was writing for asked her to do a piece on Australia, she branched into travel journalism and has since been to every continent. She has written on everything from white-water rafting on the Colorado River, horse-trekking across the Andes, elephant-riding in India and climbing the Great Wall of China, to buying lingerie in Paris, shoes in Florence and couture in Rome.

After living in London for 20 years Victoria returned to Kent. Her first novel, *The Island*, was published in 2006 and won her 'Newcomer of the Year' at the Galaxy British Book Awards 2007. She lives in Sissinghurst with her husband, Ian Hislop, and their two teenage children.

**Reviews**

'*The Return* may be a beach book, but it also goes inland and rummages around in the cellars'

*The Times*

'The historical tale is powerful stuff'

*Daily Mail*

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'Brilliant'

*Mirror*

'Meticulously researched historical narrative and imaginative storytelling...brings home the hardships of war in a way no history book ever could'

*Daily Telegraph*

'Brilliantly recreates the passion that flows through the Andalusian dancers and the dark creative force of duende... Hislop has written another worthy candidate for the "best holiday read" category'

*Scotland on Sunday*

'Packed with family drama and doomed love affairs, anyone looking for an absorbing beach read won't be disappointed'

*Psychologies*

'The queen of the intelligent beach read'

*Sunday Express*

'Like a literary Nigella, she whips up a cracking historical romance mixed with a dash of family secrets and a splash of female self-discovery... What sets Hislop apart is her ability to put a human face on the shocking civil conflict that ripped Spain apart for three bloody years between 1936 and 1939... Stirring stuff '

*Time Out*

'A gripping read'

*Woman & Home*

### Reader Reviews

'An enthralling novel from the author of *The Island* that lays bare the pain and passion of the Spanish Civil War.' Jill Phillips, Waterstone's Windsor

'The book had me in tears as I became wrapped up in its revelations' A reader on Amazon

'I have never read a book which has stirred my emotions in such a way as this one' A reader on Amazon

'I absolutely loved this book' A reader on Amazon