

LAURA KALPAKIAN

"A wonderful story of idealism, courage, and the price of love."
—Diana Gabaldon

the GREAT PRETENDERS



Book Club Kit

DEAR READERS,

Roxanne Granville says of the moviegoing experience, “You walk out bathed in emotions you didn’t have to suffer for, or struggle for, or take any risks to feel so wonderfully enhanced.” Devoted readers of fiction recognize this same sensation when they close the pages of a novel. Readers return to novels not simply for the entertainment value, but to live imaginatively beyond the confines of their immediate time or place, especially true for readers of historical fiction.

Writing a novel is a totally submersive experience. For as long as the author is in it, the endeavor absorbs your thoughts, your days, and often your nights as well. Writing a historical novel demands even more acute immersion in the process. I worked painstakingly to make *The Great Pretenders* an accurate portrayal of life in this era, certainly in terms of the challenges the characters face (the blacklist, sexism, racism) but also in the details. The novelist must perfect all the ordinary bits and pieces of everyday life: what they wore, what they ate, what they drank, what they drove. (Or if they did not drive, how did they move about? Did they move about?) What did they write with, or listen to? How did they do the laundry? These examples might sound minor, but they are crucial considerations that enrich the book.

But clearly, character is first and foremost in any novel. Characters drive fiction. Just as each of us—in real life—is but a handful of character traits tossed into a potful of historical circumstances, characters on the page respond to the circumstances of their lives. Not always gracefully. Roxanne Granville must learn everything the hard way. What heroine does not? What kind of heroine would she be if she were not willing to test the boundaries, to venture, to seek, occasionally to plunge headlong? As a heroine Roxanne navigates the social and political currents swirling around her; she finds her way, sometimes stumbling, through values, ethics, and assumptions. She is not always right, but she is seldom dull. I am hoping, dear readers, as you move through *The Great Pretenders*, you will laugh and cry, chide Roxanne for her often bad judgment, and applaud her moments of bright bravery and understanding.

Writing a novel is a solitary undertaking. Book clubs give us a chance to experience communally what is otherwise a solitary reading experience. Book clubs create a community of readers. Who among us has not had the experience of meeting someone who—you unexpectedly discover—has loved the same book you love. Instantaneous connection between kindred spirits! (To use a phrase from a childhood favorite of mine, *Anne of Green Gables*.) In putting together this Book Club Kit, I hope I can help you immerse yourselves in the experience of reading *The Great Pretenders*. As the author of this book, I hope to be there with you in spirit.

LAURA KALPAKIAN



Learn more about GOLDEN-AGE HOLLYWOOD

The blacklist era in Hollywood (1947–1960) emerged from the Cold War, that miasma of fear and political turmoil immediately following the Second World War.

Postwar America embarked on a long period of sunny prosperity—cars and homes and television sets for ordinary Americans!—but fears and dark forces emerged as well. Chief among these was the Red Menace, a belief that Communists had infiltrated government, the military, universities, and the arts. This came to be known as McCarthyism, taking the name of its most notorious warrior, Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Beginning in 1947 the House Un-American Activities Committee started seeking out Communist influence in movies and in the movie business. These hearings were not courtrooms with protocols. The people called before that committee had few rights, no right to counsel, often not even the right to read prepared statements. Many prominent members in the entertainment industry were called to testify. Early on, a large contingent of Hollywood stars showed up to offer glamorous support for their compatriots accused before HUAC. Many of the accused writers, producers, and directors were given to witty ripostes (especially the writers). Those who declined to cooperate became known as the Hollywood Ten. They would not answer the chairman's questions and they refused to name the names of their former or current comrades. They based their refusals on the belief that the First Amendment gave them the right to hold whatever political beliefs they wished. They were indicted for contempt of Congress.

Were they Communists? Some had been. Some still were. Some had long since left the party. Still, in their youth twenty years earlier (these were all middle-aged men), they had indeed sided with the Communists. In the 1930s there were consequential labor struggles and efforts to unionize all sorts of workers, including writers, actors, and people who worked at the studios. As Max Leslie tells Roxanne in the novel, “Now all

AMERICANS..... DON'T PATRONIZE REDS!!!!

**YOU CAN DRIVE THE REDS OUT OF
TELEVISION, RADIO AND HOLLY-
WOOD.....**

THIS TRACT WILL TELL YOU HOW.

WHY WE MUST DRIVE THEM OUT:

1) The REDS have made our Screen, Radio and TV Moscow's most effective Fifth Column in America . . . 2) The REDS of Hollywood and Broadway have always been the chief financial support of Communist propaganda in America . . . 3) OUR OWN FILMS, made by RED Producers, Directors, Writers and STARS, are being used by Moscow in ASIA, Africa, the Balkans and throughout Europe to create hatred of America . . . 4) RIGHT NOW films are being made to craftily glorify MARXISM, UNESCO and ONE-WORLDISM . . . and via your TV Set they are being piped into your Living Room—and are poisoning the minds of your children under your very eyes !!!

So REMEMBER — If you patronize a Film made by RED Producers, Writers, Stars and STUDIOS you are aiding and abetting COMMUNISM . . . every time you permit REDS to come into your Living Room VIA YOUR TV SET you are helping MOSCOW and the INTERNATIONALISTS to destroy America !!!

Typical US anticommunist literature
of the 1950s, specifically
addressing the entertainment industry.



The Waldorf Astoria Hotel

that youthful fervor for social justice, on behalf of labor's right to organize, including the right to strike if need be—oh yeah, there were heads and hearts broken over that twenty years ago too—that has condemned me. Condemned us.”

In that same era, the Communists were the only ones fighting the Fascists in Germany, Italy, and Spain. And then came the Second World War. The Soviet Union was our ally. In support of the war effort, Hollywood produced propaganda pictures lauding the Soviets. These war-time films would cost those writers, directors and producers dearly when HUAC called them to testify.

The Hollywood Ten fought their convictions in the courts for three years. The lower courts upheld their conviction. When the Supreme Court refused to hear their case, they all went to federal prison. Clearly, the First Amendment was no protection. After that, for nearly a decade, HUAC steamrolled through the film community almost unchecked.

Also in 1947, all the major studio heads signed what became known as the Waldorf Agreement, named after the New York hotel where they convened. They vowed to expunge from their payrolls, to fire, and never to hire anyone with the least Communist tinge. Writers, actors, directors, producers, and lesser folk who refused the committee's request to name their old Commie compatriots were immediately fired and blacklisted from working at any other studio. Some fell into poverty and obscurity. Some fled the country to Europe or Mexico. For a time the government was revoking passports. Some, like my characters, found writers to front for them. Careers were

ruined, lives wrecked, marriages crumbled. Friendships and lucrative creative partnerships were destroyed forever. Fear ruled, and the FBI could intimidate your neighbors.

To learn more about the Hollywood Blacklist, the two best books to start with are Victor Navasky's National Book Award-winning *Naming Names* (1980) and Thomas Doherty's *Show Trial: Hollywood, HUAC and the Birth of the Blacklist* (2018). Navasky gives a broad overview of the people whose lives were affected and the causes that conspired to bring so many down. Doherty's more recent book is an in-depth presentation of the 1947 hearings, including transcripts.

As a historical novelist I tried to show the human and artistic costs of these complex backgrounds. To create characters who dealt with their desperation in unique ways, and who ultimately pulled others, Roxanne among them, into the web of secrets and lies.



Charged with contempt of Congress, nine Hollywood men give themselves up to a U.S. Marshal on December 10, 1947. From right: Robert Adrian Scott, Edward Dmytryk, Samuel Ornitz, Lester Cole, Herbert Biberman, Albert Maltz, Alvah Bessie, John Howard Lawson, and Ring Lardner Jr.

MUSIC *of the* ERA

You might have noticed
***The Great Pretenders* is**
awash with music. Jazz at the Comet Club, the jukebox at Ruby's Diner, the string quartet at the *Banner Headline* party, records spinning on the hi-fi, and the ever-present AM radio. What sort of music played on the radio in 1953 and 1955?

A lot of vocalists, most of them forgotten now. Sultry Gogi Grant bemoaned her faithless lover in "The Wayward Wind," and perky Patti Page asked "How Much is that Doggie in the Window?" Teresa Brewer watched her best friend steal her man in "The Tennessee Waltz." Doris Day parted with her "Secret Love." Male singers crooned: Eddie Fisher, Tony Bennett, Perry Como, Nat King Cole.

In 1955, when Roxanne first walks into Ruby's Diner with Terrence, she can only describe the music playing on the jukebox as "Not Perry Como." In short, something she absolutely did not recognize. So who was playing on the jukebox that day?



The Platters

I'd like to think it was the Platters. The Platters (they took their name from a slang term DJs used to describe the records they played) were an LA group who first recorded in 1952. Their harmonies sound effortless, but at the same time they were among the earliest forerunners of rock and roll, rhythm and blues. The Platters went on to have forty Top Forty hits before 1967. They had four Billboard #1 hits, including "The Great Pretender." They also went on to have a long history of acrimonious litigation as the group broke up and re-formed many times. Though Terrence and Booker Dexter are jazz men, they might have known some of the original Platters who also went to Jefferson High School.

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When Roxanne next goes into Ruby's Diner in early 1956, she's learned a thing or two. She recognizes not just the singers, but the song. "On the jukebox, the Platters crooned their plaintive 'The Great Pretender'." This song will come to haunt her.

The Platters' early hits preceded Bill Haley and His Comets and their "Rock Around the Clock," a 1954 song so famous, so earth-shatteringly-popular, that they made a movie out of it—the first movie where black and white musicians performed together on screen. And then in 1955/56, Elvis Presley unleashed upon the music scene a sea change in American culture.

In that decade, between the end of World War II in 1945 and 1955, popular American music seemed to founder into a hodgepodge of tunes and styles best defined by what it wasn't. The war years of sacrifice and longing ("We'll Meet Again," "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree,") those were past. The Big Band era, that was over. The teen girls who had screamed for Frank Sinatra were suburban matrons. Many of the songs on this playlist are bland or kitschy.

But some are gems. Tennessee Ernie Ford's "Sixteen Tons" is a personal favorite. (I love the line "...another day older and deeper in debt.") Nat King Cole did some literally "Unforgettable" work, as well as hosting a short-lived television show. Peggy Lee's "Fever" is more or less immortal. I never tire of Les Paul and Mary Ford's fabulous "How High the Moon" that Jaylene Henderson sings in the Comet Club, bringing people to their feet.

This 50s playlist covers the whole decade, so remember that *The Great Pretenders* ends in the autumn of 1956. "Fever" didn't come out till 1957, or it most certainly would have appeared in the book.

These are popular songs of that era:

<https://spoti.fi/2ZBHemD>

I KNOW THE FOOD IS GOOD at Pierino's on La Cienega because I made it up for my novel *American Cookery*. The central character and the man she would marry went to lunch there in 1956. So Pierino's was waiting for the characters in *The Great Pretenders*. For this novel I added the flagstone driveway and valet parking.

I imagined Pierino's as one of those sleek, mid-century-modern places. "Chic, blonde wood paneling, blonde wood tables embraced by great rounded banquettes of red vinyl. The floors were a tough blue tile that could stand up to stiletto heels, and the crowded foyer rang with low, sophisticated voices, men in suits, women in hats and gloves, their dresses tightly belted in the New Style, their cigarette smoke sinuous." It had a jazz piano man who played standards.

I feel certain Roxanne Granville would have ordered Pierino's signature dish, the Rigatoni with Seafood and Pepper Sauce, redolent with the smell of the sea, yellow lemons, and red peppers.

Here is the recipe from *American Cookery*. Joe Pierino's wife scribbled it on a card.

Rigatoni with Seafood and Pepper Sauce



These proportions for one pound of pasta. 2 or 3 red bell peppers, perhaps four peeled garlic cloves, handful fresh basil, parsley, oregano, thyme, rosemary. Chop all. Should have some texture. Certainly not pureed. Heat olive oil in a cast-iron fry pan and cook the above quickly on a high heat. Add (big can) of crushed tomatoes and some red wine, reduce heat and simmer. (Or half a dozen chopped fresh tomatoes. If this, use extra salt.) Sprinkle with a teaspoon of crushed dried red peppers if desired, salt, pepper. Simmer a bit, maybe twenty minutes, adding more vino if necessary. Cover.

Take 1 pound mixed seafood. You can find this at the fish market, mostly the rag ends of this and that, bits of scallop, octopus, squid, shrimp, clams, mussels, whatever seafood you have you can use. Thaw if frozen. You can add more of whatever you like, for color and texture, steamed mussels, clams, but this is a good basis and not expensive.

In a broad fry pan put the juice of two lemons and perhaps half a cup of dry vermouth, and one tablespoon of olive oil. Bring to a boil, reduce heat, and let cook down by perhaps a third. To this, add your seafood and toss, cooking only as long as necessary. The pieces in the seafood combination are always small bits, so not long. Remove from heat. Add to pepper sauce and mix well. Add to cooked rigatoni. Use your just-steamed mussels and clams, and a bit of chopped Italian parsley for color.

Serve immediately. Excellent. A winter version without fresh basil could use pizza seasoning or Italian seasoning.

Enjoy this Pierino's playlist while you dine:

Apple Music: apple.co/2I7ebSz • Spotify: spoti.fi/2vbFZwk

The Panache

***Panache* is one of my favorite words. People with panache sparkle in company and display a generosity of spirit and confidence they have actually earned.**

Panache echoes Julia Greene's definition of glamour: "Glamour is nothing more than knowing how to talk fast, laugh fluidly, gesture economically and leave behind a shimmering wake." Both panache and glamour are effervescent attributes, gifts given to a fortunate few people. Certainly one of those people was Cyrano de Bergerac, title character of the famous 1897 play. Cyrano positively exudes panache.

To celebrate Empire Pictures' 1931 production of the first talkie of *Cyrano de Bergerac* (a fictitious film, by the way), Leon had a *parfumeur* create a special, signature perfume for his wife, Julia, as sophisticated and glamorous as Julia Greene herself. "An intoxicating fragrance; the top notes are citrusy, the lower notes an earthy bergamot with a hint of vanilla." These are three of my favorite scents, and combined with classy Campari and celebratory champagne, they make a memorable cocktail.

Seven friends and I gathered one winter evening to create the Panache for this Book Club Kit. We had candlelight, enticing appetizers, an array of glasses and a fabulous display of gleaming liquor and liqueur bottles, some exotic, some well known, that seemed to glow with possibilities. Our mixologist, Bacchus Taylor, was both expert and adventurous. (How could he not be with such a name?) We, the testers, were prepared to test again and again, but in truth, Bacchus, who had been thinking on this for days, came up with the



The Panache

INGREDIENTS:

1 tablespoon vanilla simple syrup

1 flute champagne

1 tablespoon Campari

1 drop bergamot essential oil

1 twist of lemon

PREPARE VANILLA SIMPLE SYRUP:

Add one cup water, one cup sugar, and ½ vanilla bean scraped with the husk and bring to a boil. Stir and let cool. Keeps for one month in refrigerator.

PREPARE THE COCKTAIL: Pour the vanilla simple syrup into the flute. Fill to one inch of the top with champagne. Slowly pour the Campari into a spoon held right above the champagne and gently tilt into the drink. Add the essential oil and twist of lemon. Enjoy!

FOR THE PERFECT TWIST OF LEMON:

Cut your lemon in half. Cut a slice from the half. With your fingers, pull off the fruit from the peel. Taking the long loop of peel, twist it over the glass (so the oils drip into the glass). Roll it a couple of times in your fingers, and slide it into the glass.

Bergamot essential oil is available in specialty stores or online.

perfect Panache early on. So, we all had seconds. Though an icy winter wind whipped round the house, the Panache made us all feel summery, like we were guests at a twilight gathering by the Versailles fountain at Summit Drive, along with Fred Astaire and Roxanne Granville.

Visually, the Panache is lovely to look at. The Campari creates a rosy glow at the bottom of the flute, and the whole floats in sparkling champagne. Sipping it, you come upon each of the flavors in turn, beginning with the whiff of fresh lemon.

The Panache is the perfect cocktail for charming, sophisticated company. Like your book club.

To listen to more *Great Pretenders* playlists, including the Central Avenue jazz scene, movie music, or civil rights anthems and hymns, please visit laurakalpakian.com and check out the various blog posts with playlists.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Uncontested assumptions about women's roles—sexism—constrict Roxanne's possibilities. So pervasive are these in the 1950s that she scarcely recognizes their effect. ("Isn't that what women have always been?" Jonathan quips. "Bartered, baffled, and dim—but kissable?") After her encounter with Irv Rakoff, Roxanne begins to understand that these underlying notions are rooted in questions of power. How does she use that insight as she establishes herself as an independent agent? Does she fight sexism? Does she use it to her own advantage? How has the role of women in Hollywood changed? How has it stayed the same?
2. Born into Hollywood royalty, a milieu that values beauty in women above all, Roxanne Granville remains always at a disadvantage. How does the birthmark on her cheek affect her life?
3. These characters are constantly being challenged to make choices that can cast them into a net of lies, and potentially into ruin. They are asked to choose between families and lovers. Between personal loyalties and political principles. Between fronting for others, taking the credit, sharing the spoils, and maintaining one's own work. Who among them makes reckless choices? Who takes calculated risks? Do the individuals in the novel sometimes not know the difference?
4. "In Hollywood fame, money, reputation, friendship, even love and marriage are conditional, flimsy, and often for effect. No one is invincible." Is Roxanne's early observation borne out in the novel? What is the role of reputation in Roxanne Granville's Hollywood?
5. How important is the press in the book? Not just the *Challenger*, but the big daily newspapers, the scandal rags, the trade papers, gossip columns, the critics. Is Roxanne correct in describing the press and the picture business as "mutually voracious cannibals"?
6. Irene and Roxanne, though not actually related, are truly sisters, and yet their values remain very different. How do their values impact their bond? How and why are they reconciled? At the end of the book, do you think Irene will be supportive of Roxanne?
7. Many of these characters engage in socially unacceptable love affairs, not merely unwise unions, but outright forbidden. Are these people changed by the experience? Are there regrets or insights gleaned? What are the costs to the lovers themselves? To their families and friends? To their reputations? Are these the sorts of relationships that still, in our own day, extract a heavy price from anyone brave or foolhardy enough to engage in them?
8. Returning to LA after Julia's death, Roxanne's feelings for Leon remain ambivalent. She does not want to live in his shadow, and makes a great show of independence. Yet she makes many important decisions based on resentment, affection, respect, and other complex emotions she feels for her grandfather. Despite her bravado, why can she not quite free herself from Leon Greene?
9. Roxanne Granville assumes that black people exist to serve white people, herself in particular. The servants at Summit Drive, for instance, are mere backdrop for her. She never suspects that Julia contributes to civil rights causes. How and when does Roxanne start to question her assumptions? How does Terrence Dexter enrich her understanding of the way family and society work—and how they ought to work? Why are both Roxanne's and

Terrence's extended families so vehemently against their affair? Does Roxanne's meditation on family that Christmas day, 1955, seem utterly improbable for that era? And now? What do you think?

10. Terrence and Roxanne are each brought up with a serious set of doctrines, Terrence in the Baptist church and Roxanne in the Church of Rick and Ilsa. When they first meet they are utterly ignorant of the other's beliefs, even though they both quote "scripture." How essential are these beliefs to their relationship? Do they learn from one another? How?
11. The novel is bookended by two funerals. Roxanne comments on the theatrical aspects of each. Is she correct in thinking that they are similar?
12. Terrence Dexter, a seasoned reporter for the *Challenger*, goes to Montgomery, Alabama, to report on the bus boycott. What does it mean to him, personally and professionally, to be a participant in these events instead of just a witness? How does his time there affect his relationship with Roxanne? With his own family? How does it change him? Can you imagine the book he is writing? Would you want to read it?
13. Roxanne is fond of quoting Julia's maxim, "Glamour is nothing more than knowing how to talk fast, laugh fluidly, gesture economically and leave behind a shimmering wake." Do you think Roxanne ever quite figures out what her grandmother meant by this? Julia makes it sound easy. Is it? Is this description of glamour allied to the notion of panache that figures so prominently in Roxanne's vision of herself?
14. Terrence says, "Leon Greene is absolutely right. Movies are powerful. They don't just reflect, they shape." Do you think this is true? Do you think that today's more diverse films still shape the way we live?
15. In 1958 *The Bridge on the River Kwai* won seven Oscars, including Best Picture and Best Adapted Screenplay, which was given to the author of the novel, Pierre Boulle. Monsieur Boulle did not even speak English. The actual screenplay was written by Carl Foreman and Michael Wilson, blacklisted writers who had fled the country, Foreman to England, Wilson to France. (Their credits were not restored until 1984.) Do you see parallels between *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *Adios Diablo*? Why did Carleton Grimes not shut down production on *Adios Diablo* when he could, before the truth came out? Can you think of instances today where the tainted reputation of filmmakers or actors is enough to tank a multimillion-dollar movie?
16. "Max, Simon, Nelson, Jerrold, taught me, early on, that the dramatic core of any film is characters who are being tested. Whether high drama or slapstick, *High Noon* or *Duck Soup*, the characters don't have to be saints, they just have to be interesting, have interesting motives, and respond to unlooked-for challenges." Is this an accurate description of what makes a good film? Now that films are able to depict sex, does that alter the standard?
17. People in the novel are always talking about loyalty as a laudable value. Who are the loyal characters? What or whom are they loyal to? How are they tested?
18. Roxanne describes her job like being "the feeder in the zoo, the guy who walks around with the bucket full of meat and throws it at the lions, and the bucket of bananas for the monkeys and the bucket full of palm fronds for the giraffes. Occasionally I wear a pith helmet. It's a jungle out there." What sorts of havoc did television wreak upon the 1950s entertainment world? Why are Gordon and Carleton and Leon so afraid of it?
19. Who are the great pretenders of the title? Are pretenses, lies, and secrets all the same thing?

Learn more about **LAURA KALPAKIAN**

Laura Kalpakian is the author of sixteen novels and four collections of short fiction published in the US and the UK. Recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Fiction, and nominated for the 2007 International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, her work has garnered acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. Her stories and memoir essays have appeared in the *Iowa Review*; *Prairie Schooner*; *American Literary Review*; and *Good Housekeeping*, the US, UK, and India editions; as well as many other magazines and literary journals.

A native Californian, Laura has a BA in history from the University of California, Riverside, and a Masters in history from the University of Delaware. She studied Literature in the PhD program at University of California, San Diego, where she developed a special affection for nineteenth-century fiction, for memoirs and autobiographies, and for writers of the Great War era. When a UCSD professor told her she had too much imagination for grad school, she started writing fiction.

One story reached a hundred pages, thus resembling a novel, and the ten-page parentheses looked suspiciously like a subplot. (Not surprisingly, this novel has a hapless grad student working in a university library archive.) When this book, *Beggars and Choosers*, was published, Laura left UCSD and turned to writing full time.

She is a longtime resident of the Pacific Northwest where she was Theodore Roethke Writer in Residence at the University of Washington and taught memoir and fiction there. She also served on the Board of Humanities Washington. She is the mother of two sons, Emmy Award-winning film and television composer Bear McCreary, and singer-songwriter and music producer Brendan McCreary.



You can learn more about Laura, her other novels and short stories, and her interests, including book reviews, recipes, and playlists, at laurakalpakian.com. You are welcome to leave thoughts and comments.

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