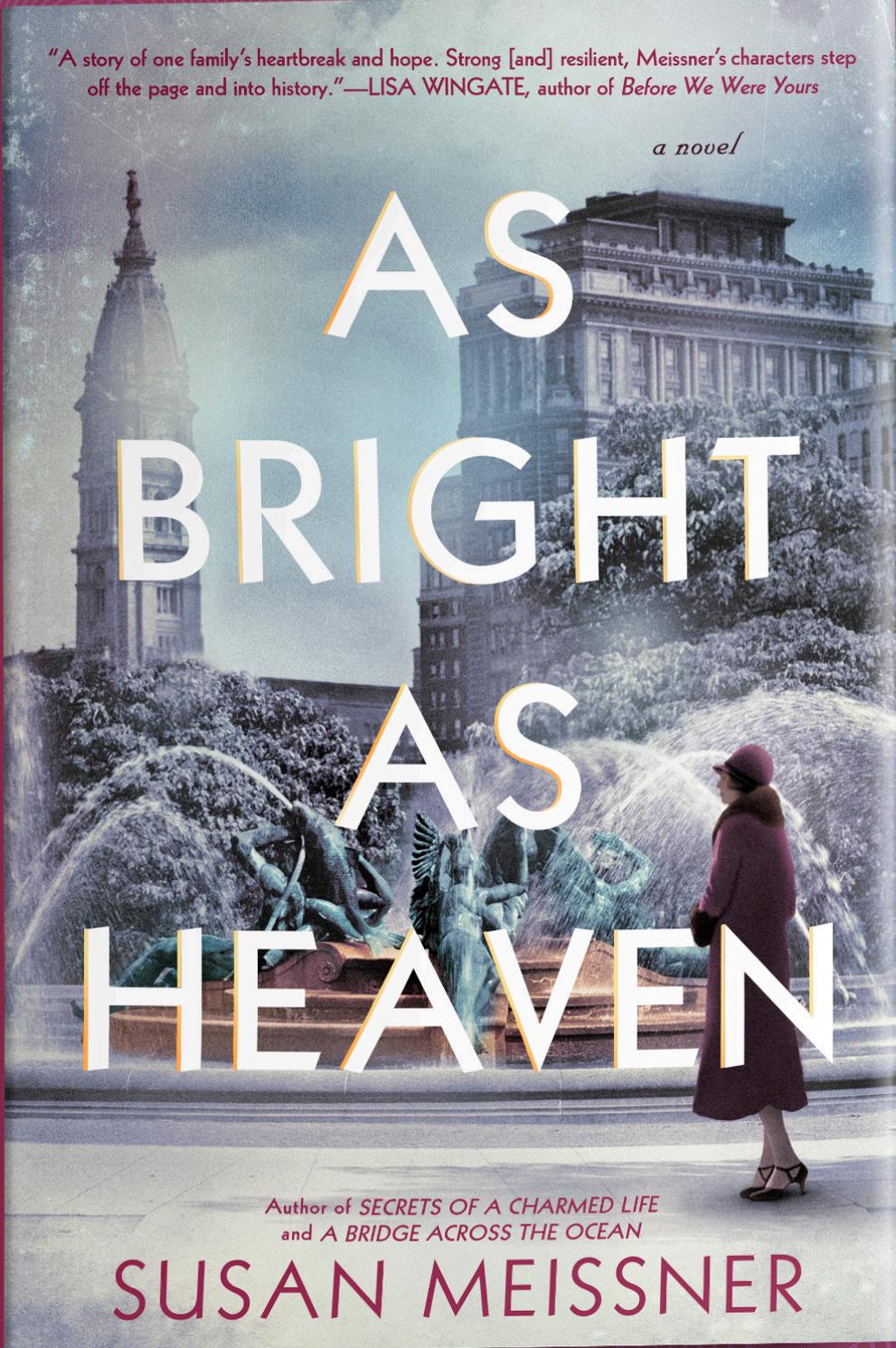


"A story of one family's heartbreak and hope. Strong [and] resilient, Meissner's characters step off the page and into history."—LISA WINGATE, author of *Before We Were Yours*

*a novel*



# AS BRIGHT AS HEAVEN

Author of *SECRETS OF A CHARMED LIFE*  
and *A BRIDGE ACROSS THE OCEAN*

SUSAN MEISSNER

BOOK CLUB KIT

# LETTER

*from Susan*

Dear Reader:

We booklovers know the past matters. History is the story of humanity. It's our story. That's why we remember that which shouldn't be forgotten, because we recognize the importance of the past to the always-unfolding human narrative.

The year before us, 2018, will mark the one hundredth anniversary of one of the most catastrophic pandemics ever recorded. The Spanish Flu of 1918 claimed a staggering fifty million lives worldwide, and yet until I began researching to write *AS BRIGHT AS HEAVEN*, I had not known the extent of this pandemic's reach, nor its impact. Surprisingly enough, most everyone to whom I mentioned this book wasn't aware either. The Spanish Flu swept across the globe with extreme swiftness and it left the same way, very nearly taking the memory of its horrors with it. As we stand at the cusp of its centennial, we have before us an opportunity to listen at last to the echoes from hundred years ago, from one of the more tragic events in the human story, and honor their remembrance.

This is a novel about the preciousness of life; about how beautiful and fragile we humans are, and yet how resilient we stand in the face of crushing loss. The Spanish Flu was more than just a moment in time; it was the individual stories of countless mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, sisters, and brothers all over the world. I wanted to imagine what one of those stories might've been, and explore all the nuances of this idea that we only get one life—just the one—so we endeavor to make it as wonderful as we can with the time we are given.

It is truly my hope and desire that this novel will provide you and your book club with a heightened understanding of this historical event, as well as a renewed appreciation for the one remarkable, amazing life you are living.

On the journey with you,

*Susan Meissner*



# Behind this Book

## LEARNING ABOUT THE SPANISH FLU PANDEMIC OF 1918

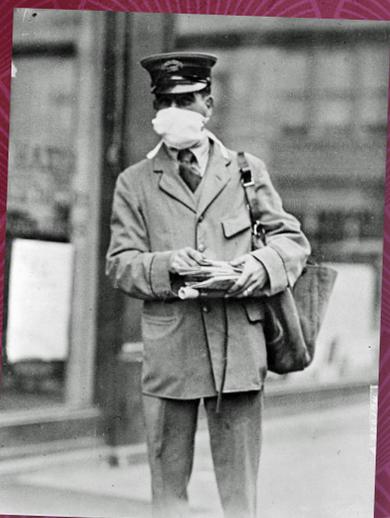
- Epidemiologists of today estimate that a third of the world's population was exposed to Spanish Flu and one fifth came down with it. One out of every two hundred people exposed died, such that the death toll worldwide surpassed combat fatalities from all wars of the 20th century. In the United States, an estimated 675,000 people perished.

- The pandemic reached from remote Alaskan communities to jungle villages in Africa.
- The Spanish Flu did not start in Spain. Most of the world was at war during the pandemic. None of the warring nations wanted to fill its newspapers with headlines declaring how decimating the flu was and how many of its people, especially its soldiers, were dying. Spain was neutral during WWI so its media was not censored. It had nothing to lose by reporting the magnitude of the flu's effects. Because all the big headlines were in Spain, that country got dubbed with its name.

- During the pandemic, the New York City health commissioner tried to slow the transmission of the flu by ordering businesses to open and close on staggered shifts to avoid overcrowding on the subways.

- The first licensed flu vaccine was made available in the United States in the 1940s. In ten years, vaccine manufacturers could routinely produce immunizations that would help control and prevent future pandemics.

The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration



### INFLUENZA!

How to Avoid It! How to Care for Those Who Have It!

The following suggestions of the California State Board of Health may prove of immeasurable value to any man or woman who will read, remember and act upon them in the present great emergency. The counsel here set forth has been prepared after consultation with some of the ablest medical men in America. If you will follow the dictates of this official bulletin, you will be doing your duty to your fellow man and to yourself.

#### What To Do Until the Doctor Comes!

If you feel a sudden chill, followed by muscular pain, headache, backache, unusual tiredness and fever, go to bed at once.  
See that there is enough bed clothing to keep you warm.  
Open all windows in your bedroom and keep them open at all times, except in rainy weather.  
Take medicine to open the bowels freely.  
Take some nourishing food, such as milk, egg-and-milk or broth every four hours.  
Stay in bed until a physician tells you that it is safe to get up.

#### TO HOUSEHOLDERS

Keep out of the sick room unless attendance is necessary.  
Do not handle articles coming from the sick room until they are boiled.  
Allow no visitors, and do not go visiting.  
Call a doctor for all inmates who show signs of beginning sickness.  
The usual symptoms are: Inflamed and watery eyes, discharging nose, backache, headache, muscular pain, and fever.  
Keep away from crowded places, such as "movies," theaters, street cars.  
See to it that your children are kept warm and dry, both night and day.  
Have sufficient fire in your home to dispense the dampness.  
Open your windows at night. If cool weather prevails, add extra bed clothing.

#### TO WORKERS

Walk to work if possible.  
Avoid the person who coughs or sneezes.  
Wash your hands before eating.  
Make full use of all available sunshine.  
Do not use a common towel. It spreads disease.  
Should you cough or sneeze, cover nose and mouth with a handkerchief.  
Keep out of crowded places. Walk in the open air rather than go to crowded places of amusement.  
Sleep is necessary for well-being—avoid over-exertion. Eat good, clean food.  
Keep away from houses where there are cases of influenza.  
If sick, no matter how slightly, see a physician. If you have had influenza, stay in bed until your doctor says you can safely get up.

#### TO NURSES

Keep clean. Isolate your patients.  
When in attendance upon patients, wear a mask which will cover both the nose and the mouth. When the mask is once in place, do not handle it.  
Change the mask every two hours. Owing to the scarcity of gauze, boil for 15 minutes and rinse, then use the gauze again.  
Wash your hands each time you come in contact with the patient. Use Lichtheim's merc, 1:1000, or Lister's Cereol compound, 1:100, for hand disinfection.  
Obtain at least seven hours' sleep in each twenty-four hours. Eat plenty of good, clean food.  
Walk in the fresh air daily.  
Sleep with your windows open.  
Insist that the patient cough, sneeze or expectorate into cloths that may be disinfected or burned.  
Wash all dishes.  
Keep patients warm.

For Copies of this publication apply to

Oakland Health Dept. City Hall, Oakland

Oakland Health Dept., courtesy of the California Historical Society, Vault\_B-168

Top: Any laborers who came in contact with the public were especially vulnerable to disease. Here, a letter carrier wears a mask while out delivering mail in New York.

Above: The United States Public health service flyer detailing steps to avoid becoming infected with the flu.

Right: Tens of thousands of Philadelphians, standing in close proximity to each other, attended a Liberty Loan Parade in late September. In three days, more than one hundred of them were dead from the flu. In ten days the death toll was more than seven thousand.



U.S. Naval Historical Center

# Behind this Book

## UNCOVERING PROHIBITION

- The era known in American history as Prohibition, began with the 18th Amendment, ratified in early 1919 and which went into effect a year later. The manufacture, sale, and transport of liquor became illegal overnight.
- Despite Prohibition laws, Philadelphia had a reputation that rivaled Chicago, Detroit, and New York City as the “wettest” city around. And the most dangerous.
- Philadelphia accommodated as many as 16,000 speakeasies during Prohibition.
- By the end of the 1920s, the increase of production and sale of bootleg liquor, the unchecked spread of countless speakeasies, and the accompanying rise in gang violence led to waning support for Prohibition.
- Congress proposed the 21st Amendment to repeal the 18th in 1933. It was ratified by the end of that year, bringing an end to Prohibition.



Courtesy of Kim Burns



The Library of Congress, cph.3a23257



The Library of Congress

Top: 1919 Philadelphia, before the start of Prohibition.

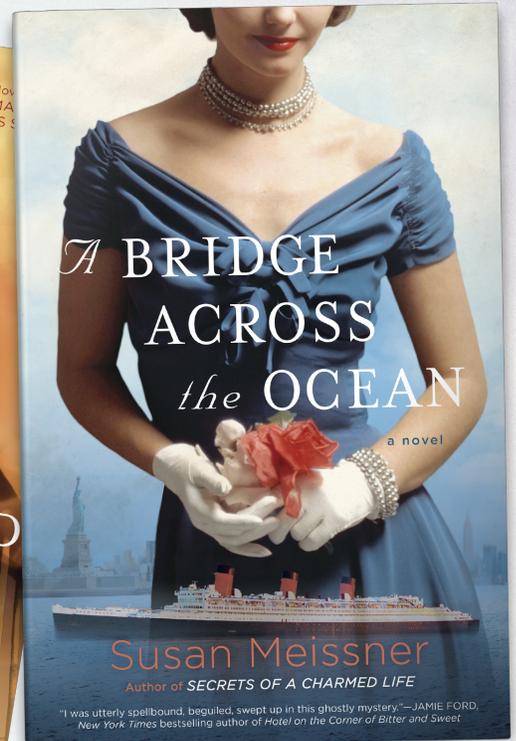
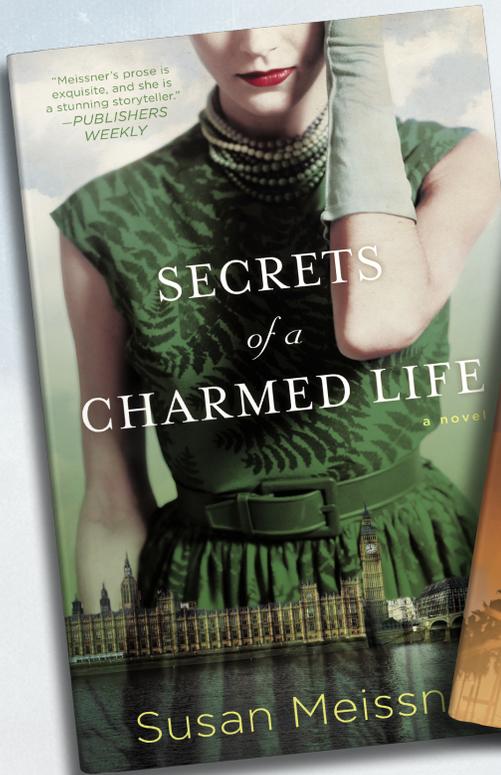
Above: New York City Deputy Police Commissioner John A. Leach, right, watching agents pour liquor into sewer following a raid during the height of prohibition.

Left: Prohibition agents destroying barrels of alcohol, circa 1921.

# Discussion Questions

- 1 What do you think it would be like to live in a city experiencing a pandemic like Philadelphia did with the flu? Do you think the Bright family made the best choices for their survival? Would you have handled things differently?
- 2 How do you think the fact that the Brights were living in a funeral home changed their experience of the flu, and how they reacted to it?
- 3 How would you describe the family dynamics between the Bright sisters and the rest of the family before the flu? How about after? Do the Bright sisters remind you of people you know?
- 4 How did the Spanish Flu pandemic shape the Bright sisters' adult lives? Did you experience a life-defining event in your childhood? How did it affect you?
- 5 Would *AS BRIGHT AS HEAVEN* be a different story if only one character had told it instead of four? How?
- 6 Could you relate to Pauline's relationship with Death after the loss of her infant son and the move to Philadelphia? Why or why not?
- 7 Discuss Maggie's actions on the day she found the baby. How did her choices affect her family? Do you empathize with her decisions?
- 8 Why do you think Maggie decided to take up Pauline's work at the funeral home after her mother died? How do you think that work changed her as she grew up?
- 9 Why do you think Evie chose to become a psychiatrist?
- 10 What do you think of Evie's final solution to her dilemma regarding Conrad? What would you have done?
- 11 Why do you think fourteen-year-old Willa was drawn to the speakeasy?
- 12 Forgiving Pauline's parents wasn't easy for Thomas Bright. Do you think what happened to Pauline was their fault? What is the most difficult part of forgiving someone, in your opinion?
- 13 Pauline's mother says: "The heart always does what it needs to do." What do you think she meant? Do you agree?
- 14 The subtle presence of butterflies appear throughout the book. How many of the references to them can you recall? What do they signify?
- 15 Has this novel changed you or your perspective on life and death? Did you learn something new about yourself or the way you think?

More from  
**SUSAN MEISSNER**



Amber Dawn Photography, 2008

SUSAN MEISSNER is a former managing editor of a weekly newspaper and an award-winning columnist. She is the award-winning author of *A Fall of Marigolds*, *Secrets of a Charmed Life*, *Stars over Sunset Boulevard*, and *A Bridge Across the Ocean* among other novels.

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