

# JENNIFER CHIAVERINI SWITCHBOARD SOLDIERS

## Reading Group Discussion Questions

1. Had you heard about the women who served as telephone operators in the US Army Signal Corps before reading *Switchboard Soldiers*? How familiar were you with American women's service abroad in World War One, either as civilians or in the military, before you read this novel?
2. *Switchboard Soldiers* is told from the perspectives of three women: Grace, an experienced operator in the Instructor Department with AT&T in New York City; Marie, a Frenchwoman and aspiring opera singer who was stranded in Cincinnati by the outbreak of war; and Valerie, a free-spirited Californian whose family immigrated to the US from Belgium when she was a child. Which of the three did you most identify with and why? What other characters did you find especially memorable?
3. As the war raged in Europe, anti-German sentiment became prevalent in the United States, even before the US entered the fight, even in cities with a significant population of German immigrants and their descendants. How is this portrayed in the novel? Do you believe that measures taken to prevent spying and sabotage, such as the Sedition Act, were justified due to national security? Why or why not?
4. Why did Grace, Marie, and Valerie want to join the US Army Signal Corps? Compare and contrast their motives and what they hoped to accomplish.
5. The telephone operators went through arduous training and testing before they were accepted into the US Army Signal Corps. What impressed you most about the process? Did anything surprise you?
6. After the First Unit arrives in Paris, where they will be dispatched to different posts throughout France, Grace fervently hopes to be sent to General Pershing's headquarters in Chaumont: "That was where the real action was, where they all wanted to be." Why were the telephone operators so eager to be assigned to the most dangerous post near the front, especially since, as Grace reflects, "Every position was essential...It didn't matter where she served, only that she did so honorably"?
7. Marie, shocked by the racism Black soldiers endure in the US Army, hopes that her American friends are "outraged by their hypocritical president, who loudly proclaimed the righteousness of fighting for democracy abroad while denying it to people in his own country, not only to Blacks who were denied the rights of full citizenship, but also to women who were denied the right to vote." Were you surprised to learn about segregation in the military in the twentieth century? Why were women and Black men willing to risk their lives in wartime service even though their country denied them fundamental rights?
8. In her Author's Note, Jennifer Chiaverini explains that upon their return to the United States, the telephone operators applied for veterans' benefits and sought to join veterans' groups, only to be informed by the Department of Defense that they had never been actual soldiers, but only contracted civilian employees. How did you feel when you learned this?
9. Reflecting upon your own experience in the military or what you have heard of other women's experiences, how has military service changed for women since the Signal Corps telephone operators sought to be the first women in the US Army? Where has progress been made, and where are improvements still needed?