

*The Spymistress*  
**Reading Group Guide**

**Questions for Discussion:**

1. From the opening pages of the novel, it is clear that Lizzie supports the Union. Does her dedication to the cause ever waver? What does her perseverance tell you about her character?
2. Discuss Lizzie and Eliza's friendship. Do any other friendships portrayed in the novel stand out to you? What are some of the ways the characters offer support to one another, often at great risk to themselves?
3. How does the news of Rose Greenhow's arrest change Lizzie's approach to her Unionist activities? Does it motivate her in some way? Why?
4. Mary and Lizzie have a difficult relationship, but manage to live together in relative peace for the sake of their families for a time. Were you surprised when Mary ultimately betrayed Lizzie? What does Lizzie's response to this news tell you about her feelings for Mary?
5. What are the Van Lews' relationships with their servants like? How do the people who work for the Van Lews see them?
6. Why is Mary Jane initially reluctant to help Lizzie? Can you understand why she might feel this way?
7. The Van Lews make a point of feasting on Confederate fast days. When there are rumors that the Union may take Richmond, Lizzie and her mother prepare a room for General McClellan. What purposes do these subtle rebellions serve?
8. Would you consider Lizzie to be a particularly self-aware person? Does she always perceive the situation at hand clearly? Is her determined nature always a boon, or does it get her into trouble sometimes?
9. How does John's conscription affect Lizzie? She risks much in her attempt to save him from the front, even though it could endanger her ability to work against the Confederates. Would you have done the same?
10. After the Emancipation Proclamation is released, William asks Lizzie and her mother what the benefit is of declaring Confederate slaves free, considering the fact that the president's authority isn't recognized in the South. What do you think? Do you agree with Lizzie's assessment?

11. Peter asks Lizzie to buy his wife, Louisa, to prevent her from being moved to another state. Why does this request give Lizzie pause at first?
12. Why is it so important to Lizzie, John, and Mr. Rowley to recover Colonel Dahlgren's body? Do you think it was worth the risk to the Unionists' lives?
13. Lizzie notes that she cannot "fathom how any colored man could take up arms to support a regime that had kept him, his family, and all his race enslaved." Yet, some—though not many—did. Can you understand why this might have been?
14. The novel closes with a scene that occurs ten years after the war has ended. Why do you think the author chose to structure the novel this way? Has the passage of time changed any of the characters' perspectives on the events of the novel?

### **Questions for the Author:**

***The Spymistress* reveals the story of an almost forgotten yet pivotal woman in American history, Elizabeth “Lizzie” Van Lew. How did you first encounter Lizzie Van Lew’s story?**

I first discovered this remarkable woman while researching an earlier historical novel, *The Union Quilters*. One of my characters, a regimental surgeon in the Union army, was captured at Gettysburg, and when I investigated where he likely would have been taken, all paths led to Richmond and to Libby Prison. Every account I read of that notorious prison mentioned Elizabeth Van Lew and the astonishing, audacious risks she took on behalf of the Union captives there, and I was compelled to include her in *The Union Quilters* as a minor but very significant character. Even as I wrote her chapter, I was convinced that she was so remarkable, so heroic, that she really deserved an entire book of her own. I’ve wanted to write her story ever since.

**Through your rich, descriptive writing, readers can really picture Elizabeth Van Lew’s daily life and relive her experiences. What kind of research did you do to so effectively put yourself in her shoes?**

I relied upon numerous memoirs and journals written by Richmond civilians and Union prisoners of war, as well as newspaper reports and official documents from the National Archives. My first and best resource, however, was Elizabeth Van Lew’s “Occasional Journal,” an intermittent diary and scrapbook she kept of her wartime experiences. It was really more of a collection of loose papers than a complete, bound volume, but it was incredibly dangerous for a spy to keep any detailed record of her illicit activities at all. During the war, Van Lew would hide most of her journal and keep certain incriminating pages by her bedside in case the house was raided during the night and she had to burn them. After the war, Van Lew declined an offer to publish a memoir, believing with good reason that doing so would further provoke the anger of her Richmond neighbors, many of whom still resented her for her wartime support of the Union. Instead she hid the manuscript away for many years, revealing its location only upon her deathbed. When the box was brought to her, she examined it and exclaimed, “Why, there is nearly twice as much more. What has become of it?” The missing pages, if they truly existed, have never been found, but what remains offers a fascinating if incomplete glimpse into Elizabeth Van Lew’s remarkable wartime adventures.

**In *Mrs. Lincoln’s Dressmaker*, you illuminated the friendship between First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln and Elizabeth Keckley, her most trusted confidante and friend. *The Spymistress***

**paints the picture of the Confederate capital, Richmond, Virginia, during the same time period. What was it like researching and writing from the opposing side of the war?**

I wouldn't say that I wrote from the opposing side of the war, because Lizzie was staunchly loyal to the United States, and so even though the story takes place in the South, I still wrote from a Unionist perspective. After coming to know wartime Washington, D. C. so thoroughly for *Mrs. Lincoln's Dressmaker*, it was fascinating to examine the Confederate capital, and to find significant differences as well as striking similarities in the experiences of their residents. It was especially intriguing to study the political heart of the Confederacy from the perspective of Elizabeth Van Lew, a proud native Virginian and well-established member of the Richmond social elite who, upon secession, suddenly found herself in the unsettling position of political outsider, surrounded by friends and neighbors she believed had gone utterly, disastrously mad.

**Elizabeth Van Lew cared for Union prisoners, orchestrated escapes from the Confederate Libby Prison, and helped construct the Richmond Underground. What did you think was the most surprising and daring of her plots?**

Smuggling information in and out of the prisons certainly put her in danger almost daily, and she risked exposing her entire operation every time she bribed a clerk or attempted to recruit a Confederate officer, but if I have to choose, I would say that sheltering fugitive prisoners in her own home was her most daring action. If her house had been raided and the prisoners discovered, not even clever, quick-thinking Lizzie could have explained away evidence *that* incriminating.

**Can you discuss some of the methods of espionage Elizabeth Van Lew employed? What were some of the ways being a woman made it more difficult, or perhaps easier, for her to successfully run a spy ring?**

Elizabeth Van Lew's methods for smuggling intelligence to the Union Army were widely varied and ingenious. She would enclose tiny scrolls of encrypted information inside a hollow eggshell, which she would hide in plain sight in a basket of fresh eggs. Her servants carried folded documents in the thick soles of their shoes, or wrote coded messages in the margins of dressmaker's patterns, and carried them safely past unwitting Confederate pickets. Numerous clerks within the Confederate government were on Van Lew's payroll, and they kept her well supplied with essential information about military and political operations. She also managed to place trusted allies in important positions within the prison system and the railroad, where they passed along intelligence and generally did whatever they secretly could to thwart the Confederate operations. Van Lew performed the role of loyal Confederate lady exceptionally well, and convinced nearly everyone that her acts of generosity and concern for Union prisoners of war were merely the fulfillment of her duties as a good Christian woman. She wisely took advantage of the Confederate authorities' refusal to believe that an elite Southern lady could be a dangerous Union spy.

**The astonishing scope of Lizzie's achievements has never been widely known. What do you hope readers take away from the novel?**

Readers familiar with Elizabeth Van Lew may wonder why I don't refer to her as "Crazy Bet," as the vast majority of authors who have written about her have done, or why I haven't portrayed her feigning mental impairment to divert suspicion. I made this choice because nothing in the historical record during the Civil War and its aftermath supports this characterization—not her wartime "Occasional Journal," nor the memoirs of the Union soldiers she assisted, nor even the writings of her numerous critics. The concept that Elizabeth Van Lew succeeded in her espionage work because of her ability to disarm her enemies by acting daft first appeared in a *Harper's Monthly*

article published in 1911, written eleven years after her death by someone who had never met her. The author was heavily influenced by a man who had met Elizabeth Van Lew after Reconstruction, when she was in her late sixties and age, poverty, political troubles, personal heartbreak, and isolation had taken their toll. Unfortunately, the “Crazy Bet” myth has long overshadowed the truth about Elizabeth Van Lew’s intelligent, deliberate, and dangerous espionage work, but I hope my novel will help correct that misunderstanding.

**In both of your stand-alone novels, you chronicled the lives of women who had a significant impact on history that many people were not aware of. Can you give us a preview of what the January 2014 release, *Mrs. Lincoln’s Rival*, will reveal?**

*Mrs. Lincoln’s Rival* is the story of Kate Chase Sprague, the daughter of President Lincoln’s Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase. Beautiful, intelligent, and entrancing, Kate served as her thrice-widowed father’s official hostess and was his partner in his driving ambition to become president. Soon after they met, Mary Lincoln recognized in Kate her strongest challenger for the role of most prominent woman in Washington society, and an intense rivalry was born. Unfortunately, although Kate and Mary held much in common—political acumen, love of country, and a resolute determination to help the men they loved achieve greatness—they could never be friends, for they believed that the success of one could come only at the expense of the other.