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Mr. Churchill's Secretary: A Maggie Hope Novel, Book 1



Synopsis

For fans of Jacqueline Winspear, Laurie R. King, and Anne Perry, Mr. Churchill's Secretary captures the drama of an era of unprecedented challenge - and the greatness that rose to meet it. London, 1940: Winston Churchill has just been sworn in, war rages across the Channel, and the threat of a Blitz looms larger by the day. But none of this deters Maggie Hope. She graduated at the top of her college class and possesses all the skills of the finest minds in British intelligence, but her gender qualifies her only to be the newest typist at No. 10 Downing Street. Her indefatigable spirit and remarkable gifts for codebreaking, though, rival those of even the highest men in government, and Maggie finds that working for the prime minister affords her a level of clearance she could never have imagined - and opportunities she will not let pass. In troubled, deadly times, with air-raid sirens sending multitudes underground, access to the War Rooms also exposes Maggie to the machinations of a menacing faction determined to do whatever it takes to change the course of history. Ensnared in a web of spies, murder, and intrigue, Maggie must work quickly to balance her duty to King and Country with her chances for survival. And when she unravels a mystery that points toward her own family's hidden secrets, she'll discover that her quick wits are all that stand between an assassin's murderous plan and Churchill himself. In this daring debut, Susan Elia MacNeal blends meticulous research on the era, psychological insight into Winston Churchill, and the creation of a riveting main character, Maggie Hope, into a spectacularly crafted novel.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I quite enjoyed this book, with its engaging main character, Maggie Hope, a British-born American who, while closing her deceased grandmother's house, is caught in London by the outbreak of World War II. With time, I think that the Maggie mysteries could develop into a very good series, indeed. The author's handling of the various strands of the plot is clever, although she sometimes tipped her hand in planting false clues that seemed a bit obvious, inviting readerly speculation prematurely. Some episodes, however, called for a severe suspension of disbelief, as when it doesn't seem to occur to Maggie, the bright young mathematician, that the simple morse she is decoding, which initially makes no sense, might actually be in the language of the main enemy that the world is fighting, Nazi Germany--especially when she later proves to be fluent in German. The 'meticulous research'--advertised in Bantam's blurbs--needs to be toned down and incorporated seamlessly into the narrative so that one barely notices it, because the history-mystery genre represents a minefield, in which one false step will cause the story to explode in the reader's face, which is what I felt happened about half-way through the book, when the narrative began to lose its credibility. Such 'explosions' occur when the author trips over anachronisms that betray that she is not really at home in the British world, at least historically. One such has been noted by another reviewer, who observed that women (i.e., 'Aunt Edith') were not awarded Cambridge degrees until 1947.

I wanted to like this book so badly, I really did. It had everything I was interested in- it was a murder mystery, a historical novel, a female protagonist who actually does something, et cetera. But it just didn't deliver. To start, this is not a well-written book. I've read books with lackluster writing in the past, but this takes the cake. The sentences plod, the scenery drags, and it's filled with characters who are more talking heads than real people. Constant conversations about how "there's a war on, you know!" just kill it for me. It's as if the author is so invested in her setting that she neglects things like characterization and showing detail. She's obviously done a lot of research, and tells us - but I never feel like I'm really there. I feel like someone is just telling me that she did a lot of research, and as a result, I can't get lost in the book. Second, the plot is incredibly clumsy. There's too much in it - again, showing us how much research she's done - and the foreshadowing is weak at best. Apparently, Maggie's father is a big deal, unbeknownst to her, and characters hint at it in quaint exchanges like this: "But then there's Maggie's father..." "She doesn't know about him!" "Yet!" And cue the dramatic music. There's no delicate suspense. Everything is thrown at the reader - there's never a chance to guess which characters are good and which ones aren't, or a chance to really look at a character's flaws, because everything in this novel is black or white. But a hero who has

flaws and a villain who can be genuinely good makes for a much more interesting read; but for all of Maggie's "flaws," we're supposed to wink at each other and say that Maggie's still the white knight of the story.

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