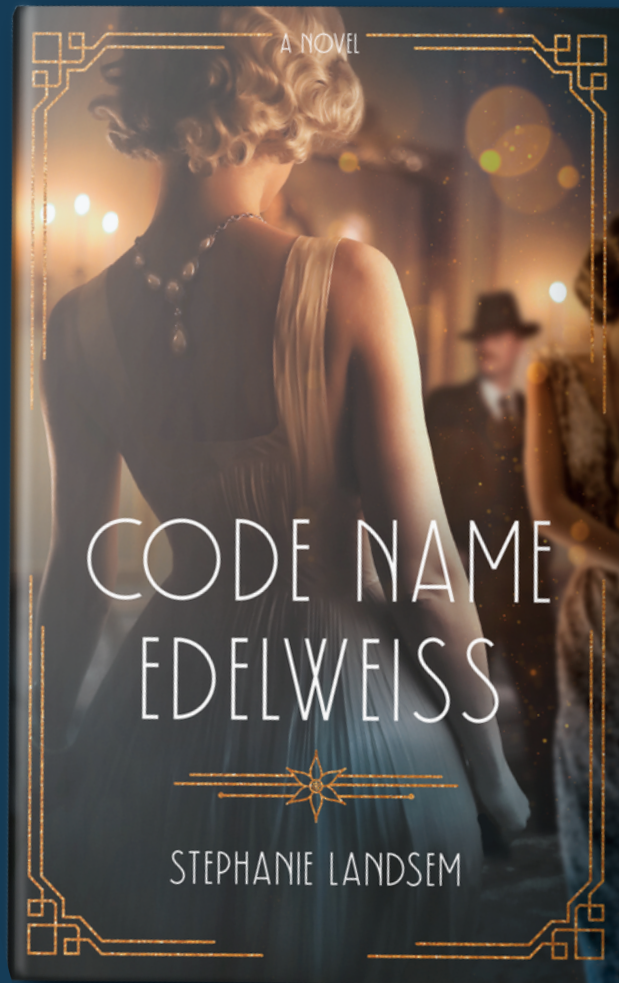


Book Club Kit



"Thrilling, vivid, expertly researched, and all too timely."

SUSAN ELIA MACNEAL, author of *Mother Daughter Traitor Spy*
and the *New York Times* bestselling Maggie Hope series

ABOUT STEPHANIE LANDSEM



Stephanie Landsem writes historical fiction for women, about women. She's traveled the world in real life and traveled through time in her research and imagination. As she's learned about women of the past, she's come to realize that these long-ago women were very much like us. They loved, dreamed, and made mistakes. They struggled, failed, and triumphed. She writes to honor their lives and to bring today's women hope and encouragement.

Stephanie makes her home in Minnesota with her husband, two cats and a dog, and frequent visits from her four adult children. Along with reading, writing, and research, she dreams about her next travel adventure—whether it be in person or on the page.

Follow Stephanie on social media:



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P.S. Visit stephanielandsem.com and sign up for the author's newsletter to get news & updates delivered directly to your inbox.

Q&A WITH STEPHANIE LANDSEM

To learn more about the historical landscape against which *Code Name Edelweiss* takes place, read through this Q&A with author Stephanie Landsem with your book group.

***Code Name Edelweiss* is based on true events—what led you to explore Hitler’s secret efforts to influence Hollywood?**

I stumbled upon the story of Leon Lewis and his spy network when I was researching my last novel, In a Far-Off Land. As I read about Hitlerites infiltrating Hollywood and Nazis taking over German American groups in Los Angeles, I was incredulous. Why hadn’t I heard of this before? How could something like this happen in America? I knew I had to find out more and write about this unknown moment in history.

What was Hollywood like during the Great Depression?

Hollywood was very much a land of the haves and the have-nots during the 1930s. While the majority of the population of Los Angeles and the rest of the country were struggling with rampant unemployment, hunger, and homelessness, the film executives and film stars of the era were flush with the kind of wealth that led to decadent lifestyles. While many of the have-nots loved to watch the films and dream of stardom, plenty of others were outraged and bitter at the social divide.

How did the German government control Hollywood filmmaking in the 1930s?

The German vice-consul to Los Angeles, Georg Gyssling, exerted immense control over the content of films produced by all the major Hollywood studios. He was referred to as “Hitler’s Hollywood Consul” and his task was clearly defined: to ensure that no films portrayed Jews or Jewish life in a positive way and that no films were critical of the German people or the Nazi government.

How was writing a spy story different from your previous work? Was it more challenging?

I read widely and that includes spy novels, so I was thrilled to try my hand at writing one. I found it was far more complicated and challenging than my previous books, but also a lot of fun! I especially enjoyed writing in a way that let the reader in on some secrets that neither Liesl nor Agent Thirteen knew. To see the characters figure out what the reader already knows is a satisfying part of reading this genre.

What is your hope for readers of *Code Name Edelweiss*?

Leon Lewis’s decades-long fight against the Nazi threat to Los Angeles is well-documented and yet virtually unknown. I am eager to show the world the heroes and heroines who saved Los Angeles—and America—from Hitler and his Nazi regime.

FACT MEETS FICTION

STEPHANIE LANDSEM ON TRUE EVENTS THAT INFORMED *CODE NAME EDELWEISS*

I'm often asked what is real and what is fiction in my novels. For *Code Name Edelweiss*, the answer might be surprising: the story is based largely on real events and real people.

Leon Lewis was a man we should all be thankful for. He really did have Christian agents of German heritage who infiltrated the German American organizations of Los Angeles to gather information about the Nazis and the takeover of the studio system. Through his efforts, the Nazi influence in Los Angeles was dramatically curtailed in the years leading up to World War II.

The actual work of Leon Lewis and his operatives covered over a decade and was primarily a legal battle that included a great deal of paperwork, documentation, meetings, and hearings—not the stuff fast-paced novels are made of! For that reason, I chose to write about the beginning of Lewis's crusade, when he did indeed have only a few operatives and was desperately attempting to get authorities to recognize the threat of a man named Adolf Hitler.

Leon Lewis had female operatives to whom he gave code names. Grace Comfort, Agent G2, and her daughter Sylvia,

Agent S3, worked in much the same way that my fictional heroine does—pretending to be sympathetic to the Nazi cause and doing volunteer office work for the Friends of New Germany. His female agents attended social events and fascist women's groups, while secretly reporting their activities and smuggling documents to Lewis. The post office scene in which Liesl is arrested was inspired by the sham arrest Sylvia Comfort devised to solidify her position of trust within the Nazi organization.

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Georg Gyssling was a real thorn in the side of the studio moguls during the 1930s. Hermann Schwinn was the leader of the Friends of New Germany and a member of the Nazi Party, although he didn't marry his wife, Thekla, until 1939. Other historical but fictionalized characters are Captain Hynes of the LAPD, Paul Themnitz, Hans Winterhalder, and Franz Ferenz. Oh, and also Hermann Schwinn's dog, Lump.

The Friends of New Germany, the Aryan Bookstore, and the other anti-Semitic organizations of Los Angeles were unfortunately quite real. Fascism grew at a phenomenal rate in the early 1930s all over the country, supported by Nazis overseas and homegrown organizations such as the KKK. There is plenty of evidence that these fascist organizations plotted many of the events that I've included in my novel. Schwinn and Winterhalder had connections to the San Diego armory and access to weapons.

They had plans for attacks on the studios and a list of assassination targets that included studio heads and prominent Jewish actors. Thanks to Leon Lewis and his operatives, none of the violent events got beyond the planning stages.

Another truth-is-better-than-fiction part of *Code Name Edelweiss* is the script of *The Mad Dog of Europe* by Herman Mankiewicz. "Mank," as he was known in Hollywood, was a brilliant if difficult Jewish screenplay writer for MGM who—like Leon Lewis—saw the dangers of Adolf Hitler long before others. In 1933, he wrote *The Mad Dog of Europe*, a scathing attempt to wake up the American public to the dangers of what was happening in Europe. Unsurprisingly, he found no one willing to finance and produce the film. The film industry closed ranks on Mank, ensuring that even if he did get the film produced, no theaters would agree to show it. He eventually gave up the fight.

My aim in *Code Name Edelweiss* and in all my fiction is not to document a historical event but to write a compelling story about how a character reacts to this event, how it affects her life, and how she is changed by what she encounters. One of my favorite quotes about fiction is this: "A story doesn't have to be true to tell the truth." This is what I hope you gain from Liesl and Wilhelm's story: the truth about courage, conviction, and love that both encompasses and transcends the historical record.

"A harrowing look at the real-life Nazi organizations in Los Angeles before World War II. . . . An outstanding novel."

Sarah Sundin, bestselling and award-winning author of *Until Leaves Fall in Paris*



A NOTE FROM

Stephanie Landsem

"Where do you get your book ideas?"

It's a question I'm often asked, and the answer is different for every novel. Ideas come from many sources: my research, my own life experiences, and what's going on in the world.

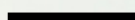
Code Name Edelweiss came from all those places.

When I was doing my final research for my previous novel, *In a Far-Off Land*, I came upon an article about the rise of fascism in 1930s Los Angeles. Intrigued, I followed that white rabbit down the hole and found something interesting—the story of Leon Lewis and his spy network. That's when the idea for a new book was sparked.

Some of you may know how I love my German heritage. My father came from a strong German community in Pennsylvania. He was 100 percent German and 100 percent American. So American that he lied about his age and signed up to fight in WWII, although the war ended before he completed basic training. I was raised to respect the German ideals of duty to family and country. I studied the German language and traveled extensively in Germany and Austria as a teenager and in my twenties. I learned there about Hitler's rise to power, wept at the remains of the Dachau concentration camp, and walked on Unter Den Linden Strasse, where Hitler's troops marched to war. I asked myself, *How could good people allow such evil?* That question has always haunted me.

Then there was what was happening in our own time in the United States. The years between 2016 and 2020 were ones of increasing division in our country. Families split along political lines. Our partisan government bickered instead of leading. The media lost credibility. Starting in 2020, a global pandemic created fear, peaceful protests turned violent, and mob mentality destroyed cities. Every part of our society struggled with isolation, distrust, and division. I began to see more clearly what might have happened during the privations of the Great Depression, the tragedy of the Dust Bowl, and the heightened racial tensions of the 1930s.

How did good people allow the evil of the Nazis to flourish? Why did they follow—or at least not speak out against—Hitler and his party? I believe, as Leon Lewis said, it had to do with fear. We've seen an increase in that kind of fear in our own lives in the past few years. Fear has changed the landscape of our country and in some cases of our own families. I hope within the pages of *Code Name Edelweiss*, readers will be heartened to move past the fear with courage and love. Love for our families and friends—but more importantly for those who are different from us, those who disagree with us, even those who may be considered our enemies. For if not us, who? And if not now, when?



A TIME TO REFLECT:

Spend some time thinking about the messages and themes in *Code Name Edelweiss*. How have they challenged you to speak up when you see something wrong happening around you? How can you become a more active participant in changing the world for good, even when others around you seem disinterested?

"Stephanie Landsem does a masterful job of showing how easily and insidiously hatred and prejudice can grow—and what our response to it must be. Well done!"

Lynn Austin, bestselling and award-winning
author of *Long Way Home*




DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Use these questions to help your club further its conversation about *Code Name Edelweiss*.

- 1.) Liesl believes her husband—who she thought was happy and loved her—has left her and their children. This makes her question everything in her life that she thought was true. Has anything like this happened to you, where an event shattered your trust in yourself and what you believed?
- 2.) Liesl says early in the story, “If what was happening in Germany was true—and I wasn’t certain it was—of course I felt terrible for those people. The Jews.” Who are “those people” in your life? People you may have sympathy for but who are not “your” people and therefore not your problem? Has God ever called you to stand up for someone you think of as not your own, “other,” or “them”? How did you respond?
- 3.) Liesl wonders, “How could children as young as Hildy Grundbacher already be poisoned by hate? Her mother and father had taught it to her and been taught the same by their own parents.” Are there biases or preconceptions you maybe have toward others because of the way you were raised? What are some ways parents can try to break the cycle of passing along inappropriate prejudices to their children?
- 4.) Wilhelm observes that people are mostly concerned with their own problems and often don’t see the injustices happening around them—or don’t know what to do about them. How can we discern when God is calling us to step outside our own lives and address larger problems in the world with our specific gifts?

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5.) All that is needed for evil to flourish is for good men to do nothing” is an oft-quoted statement. We frequently equate it with the evils of Hitler and the horrors of WWII, but it can also be applied to our everyday life. Where in our day-to-day do we see this played out? What part can we play in either letting evil flourish or standing against it?

6.) Have you experienced a deep and meaningful friendship such as Liesl and Miriam had, someone with whom you can share your innermost fears and joys? Do your best friends tend to be like you or very different from you?

7.) Liesl must answer Tess’s question about the nature of evil and why God allows it. How would you answer a child’s question of why God allows people to do bad things? Would your answer to an adult be different or the same?

8.) In considering why God allows evil, Wilhelm decides that God does stop evil, “but not with fire and brimstone or smiting like Wilhelm would have done. No, he used people—good people like Leon Lewis, not-so-good people like himself. Gave them what they needed to work with and let them at it. Wilhelm would sure prefer the fire and brimstone, but maybe that’s why God was God . . . and he wasn’t.” How does Wilhelm’s conclusion reflect his own troubled childhood and experience of God? When have you wished God would do things your way instead of his? How do you manage to trust in God’s plan instead of your own?

9.) Liesl confides to her mother that she is afraid she doesn’t pray correctly, and her mother tells her there is no wrong way to pray. Do you agree? Why do we sometimes feel that our prayers might not be “correct”?

10.) Have you experienced a deep and meaningful friendship such as Liesl and Miriam had, someone with whom you can share your innermost fears and joys? Do your best friends tend to be like you or very different from you?

“A page-turning tale, it’s equal parts genuine danger, passionate bravery, and fearless truth. . . . A daring and inspiring triumph.”

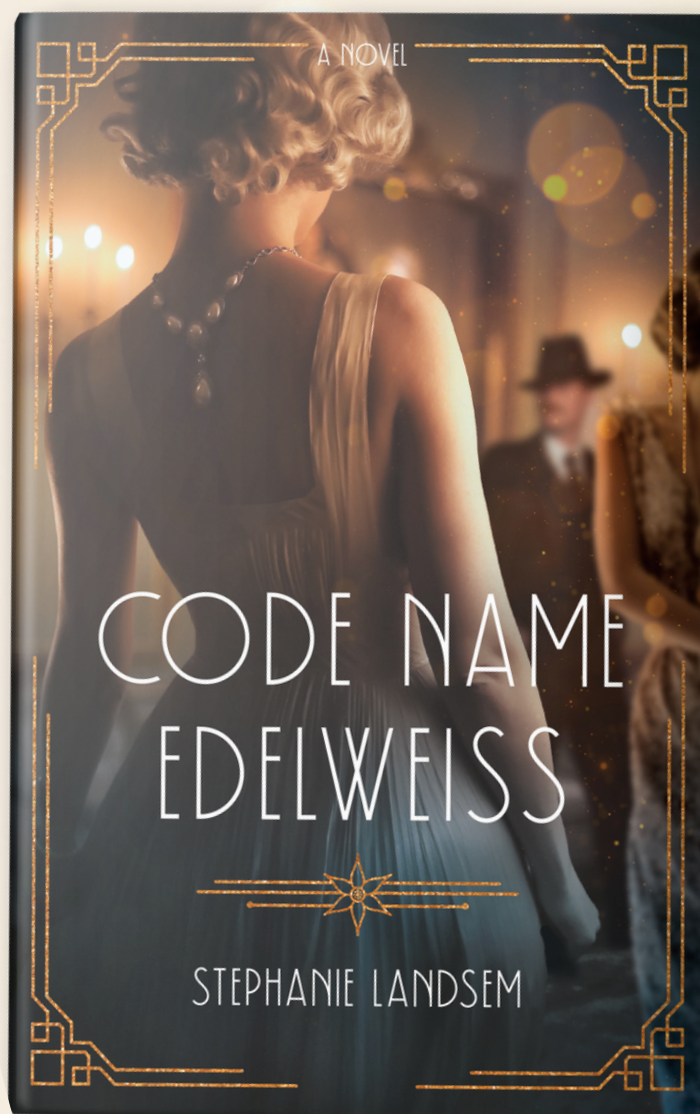
Patricia Raybon, award-winning author of *All That Is Secret* and *I Told the Mountain to Move*

MY BOOK CLUB NOTES

Use this as a space to jot down thoughts about the novel that came to mind as you were reading the story or during book club conversations.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins or other markings visible.

Thanks for choosing



for your book club!

Step back in time
to the Golden Age
of Hollywood in



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