

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
OF *TULLY* AND *THE BRONZE HORSEMAN*

PAULLINA
SIMONS

READING
NOTES

THE
BELL
AND THE
BLADE

In the heart of war,
love is the deadliest weapon.

BLURB

IT'S 1944. THE WORLD IS AT WAR.

FORCES OF EVIL HOLD EUROPE BY THE THROAT.

After a mysterious massacre at sea, a ragtag alliance forms in the heart of occupied Belgium. A handful of Allied soldiers band together with a fearless group of female freedom fighters led by Charlotte Fontaine to carry out a mission no one else can.

The target: unreachable.

The clock: ticking.

The consequences: apocalyptic.

Charlotte: Resolute, hardened by loss – she'll stop at nothing to save the one she loves.

Fletcher: Sharp as a blade, he never wanted to lead, but now he's the only one who can finish it.

Louise: Radiant. Innocent. She dreams of peace, but the war won't let her go.

Rafael: Rebellious, reckless, romantic – and brought to his knees by love.

With time running out, they're hunted by a brilliant and relentless German officer hellbent on their destruction. In a world on fire, it's the unbreakable bonds between the unlikely heroes that make all the difference.

From the master storyteller of *The Bronze Horseman* comes a thrilling, darkly funny and heartbreaking epic of love, brotherhood, and sacrifice – when every heartbeat could be your last.

ABOUT PAULLINA SIMONS

PAULLINA SIMONS is the author of sixteen internationally bestselling novels, one non-fiction memoir, a cookbook, and two children's books.

Born and raised in the former Soviet Union, Paullina immigrated with her family to the United States in the mid-seventies. She received her Bachelor's degree in political science from Kansas University. She has lived in Rome, London, Dallas, and now lives in New York with her husband and four children.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**** Please note, these questions contain spoilers ****

1. What are your thoughts on the overarching theme of war as depicted in the novel? How do Stephen Crane's epigraph and the other quotations included in the part titles contribute to this depiction?
2. This novel is divided roughly into three perspectives: that of the women (marked by a bell), that of the soldiers (marked by a parachute) and that of the Germans Rheinhardt and Hubner (marked by an Iron Cross). How do these distinctions affect your reading experience?
3. This book weaves moments of humor and warmth into its darker themes. Did any scenes make you laugh or smile unexpectedly? Why do those moments matter? How does this interplay affect your reading?
4. Charlie Fontaine begins the novel as a hardened resistance fighter, driven by guilt and grief. But she ends it with tenderness and hope. How does her arc – especially her relationship with Fletcher – reveal the costs of war and the possibility of healing?
5. Fletcher Gray is not a conventional hero – he's reluctant, haunted, and deeply private. And yet by the end of the novel, he's undeniably the leader and moral center. What makes Fletcher's heroism resonate? In what ways does his silence speak volumes?
6. Von Rheinhardt and Hubner are the villains of the story – but they are never cartoonish. What did you make of their relationship? How does their intelligence, loyalty, or wit challenge the usual portrayals of wartime antagonists? In what ways does the novel complicate our view of evil?
7. Saul Grunfell is a Belgian Jew, imprisoned by the Nazis – yet he chooses to work for them, helping them build the weapon that could win them the war. How do you make sense of his collaboration? Is it scientific detachment, survival instinct, moral collapse, or something more complicated – or perhaps something simpler, like his overweening confidence in his own genius? How does Saul's insistence on being "Belgian" rather than "Jewish" affect his choices and his conscience? How does his moral dilemma and transformation challenge assumptions about who is enemy and who is friend?
8. Louise is one of the most surprising characters in the book. At first, she seems to float above the war – beautiful, lighthearted, possibly naive. She seems frivolous, even. But by the end of the novel, she emerges as the moral compass of the entire story. How does she defy your expectations? How does her journey complicate this perception? What do you think of her final act of moral defiance?
9. What role do the supporting female characters – such as Brigitte, Mireille, Hildimar, Maxine, and Margot – play in shaping the emotional texture of the novel? How do they challenge the traditional boundaries of female roles in wartime? They are strong women, but they're not hardened warriors. They sing, they flirt, they cry, they bake, they love. How does the novel challenge the idea that war turns women into men, or that softness is weakness?

10. Explore the significance of the “secret cargo” aboard the ship. What does it symbolize within the story? How does the cargo’s hidden nature parallel the characters’ own hidden truths or allegiances?
11. The bond between Ngomo and Zeus is one of pure love, unaffected by race, religion, or background. Each has no prior experience of the other: Ngomo has not lived among the Jews, and Zeus has never met a black man. What does their relationship suggest about the nature of prejudice? Is it something learned or innate?
12. In contrast to the majority of the book, the scenes in the chapter “Oars in the Water” are set in the present tense. Why do you think the author chose to write them in this way?
13. How is suspense built through the pacing of narrative reveals? How does the book’s structure support or enhance this?
14. What is the impact of the historical backdrop on the characters’ psychology and decision-making processes? Do you think things would play out differently if this book were set in the modern day? If so, in what ways?
15. Bells (and belles) feature both literally and symbolically throughout the book. Give examples, and discuss what this symbol conveys and the effect this has on the story.
16. In what ways do the women of *The Bell and the Blade* show courage? What are some of the small or large acts of bravery that stood out to you?
17. The novel frequently explores dual identities: Charlie as a resistance fighter and daughter; Louise as a beauty and a spy; Fletcher as a soldier and a decoy. How does this theme of duality resonate throughout the book?
18. Consider the role of setting – Belgium’s cities, forests, and abbeys. How do specific locations like the Antwerp docks, the abbey, or Zwart Haus contribute to the atmosphere, tension, and symbolic meaning?
19. One of the most emotionally devastating moments in the book is the battle at Sancta Maria in Silvis Sacris. How did this section affect you? How does the author use different stylistic choices for language and punctuation to manage pacing and emotional buildup during these scenes, and what is the effect of this, in your opinion?
20. Several characters wrestle with the idea of home – what it is, and whether they’ll ever return to it. What does “home” mean to different people in the novel?
21. This is a book about resistance – but also about an inner moral struggle. Which character’s choices stayed with you most? Discuss this with particular reference to the actions of Louise, Dory, Fletcher and Ngomo.
22. In one of the book’s most morally fraught scenes, Louise chooses not to assassinate Saul Grunfell – seemingly jeopardizing the mission, and yet unbeknownst to her and to the main characters, actually saving it. What did you make of this decision? Would you have done the same? What argument is the novel making about mercy, trust, or faith?
23. Fletcher chooses to let Von Rheinhardt live. He doesn’t do it out of weakness, or even moral superiority – but to deny him the glory of death. What does this say about Fletcher’s moral evolution? Is this an act of mercy – or punishment?

24. Why do you think the author chose to end the book not with the survival of Fletcher and Charlie, but with Von Rheinhardt's final coda, haunted by his memory of Louise, and looking back in confusion and incomprehension on the single most crucial moment of his life (other than Fletcher's sparing it)? How does this choice underscore the thematic elements of the story, and what does it emphasize about legacy, regret, and the unknowable ripple effects of small and large acts that affect one's future?
25. How does ending on Von Rheinhardt's haunted confusion and his last thought of Louise affect the way you experience the book's message?