

BOOK CLUB KIT

IF I WERE YOU

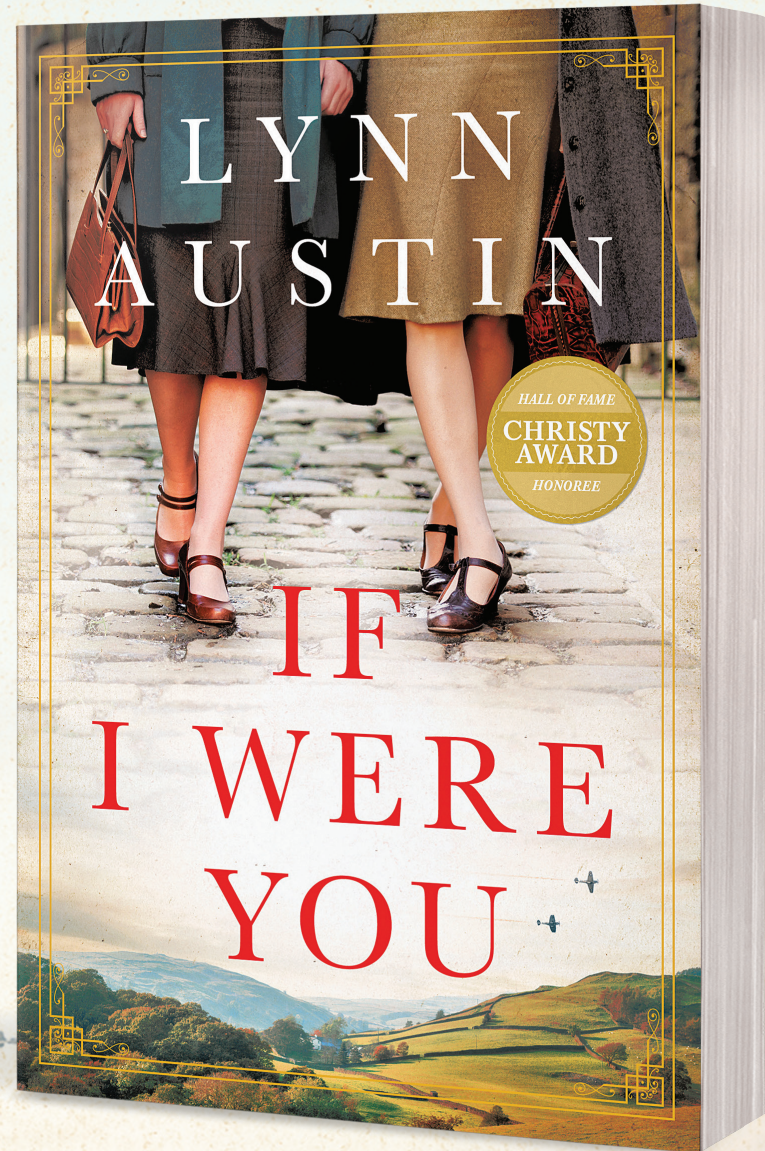
LYNNAUSTIN.ORG

In the wake of WWII, one woman's decision to take her friend's place as a British war bride in America will weave a web of lies and unearth a history of envy that will push them both to the breaking point.

"If I Were You is a page-turning, nail-biting, heart-stopping gem of a story. Once again, Lynn Austin has done her homework. Each detail rings true, pulling us into Audrey and Eve's differing worlds of privilege and poverty, while we watch their friendship and their faith in God struggle to survive. I loved traveling along on their journey, with all its unexpected twists and turns, and sighed with satisfaction when I reached the final page. *So good.*"

LIZ CURTIS HIGGS

New York Times bestselling author of *Mine Is the Night*





A NOTE *from* THE AUTHOR

The inspiration for *If I Were You* came from a true story about a British war bride who arrived in America only to learn that her husband had died in a tragic accident. I wondered what I would do in that situation—return home or remain in a strange country without the man I loved? I recalled a friend’s mother, a British war bride who met her American husband much like Audrey met Robert. *How sweet and romantic, I thought, to love someone so much that you would leave your family and your country to follow him across the ocean!* My creativity had begun to percolate.

The next step was to research—not by digging through history books about politics and WWII battles, but by reading diaries, memoirs, and first-person stories from people who lived through those events. In my friend’s case, her parents’ love lasted a lifetime. But in a collection of memoirs I read titled *GI Brides*, I learned that wartime marriages didn’t always end up happily ever after.

As I read about life in England, I discovered that the two world wars essentially erased the divide between the upper classes and their servants. I’m a huge fan of *Downton Abbey*, so I knew I wanted to take my story in that direction. I came

across a memoir called *Minding the Manor* by Mollie Moran, who tells all about her life as a British maidservant. Another book, *Upstairs and Downstairs*, filled me in on the minutiae of rules and traditions. It seems that most servants weren’t always treated as well as the servants on *Downton Abbey*!

In another interesting book, *Millions Like Us*, women who lived in Britain during the war told stories of what everyday life was like and how the war changed them. I developed a deep admiration for British women who served in so many different capacities in order to save their nation—everything from laboring on farms and operating complicated radar systems to driving ambulances like Audrey and Eve. Everyone did their bit for the war effort, even Princess Elizabeth—now Queen Elizabeth II—who donned a uniform and learned to drive a lorry.



(Continued)

A NOTE *from* THE AUTHOR

Fortunately for me, the British preserved a lot of WWII history on film and in newsreels, readily available on the internet. I could sit at my computer for hours and watch footage, viewing everyday life, seeing the aftermath of bombing raids, and hearing people's reactions to the war. I listened to Prime Minister Churchill's speeches and watched King George V's funeral procession, just as my characters did.

As interesting as all this was, I couldn't keep my nose in a book or in front of a computer screen all the time. One of my favorite ways to research is to travel to where my novels take place and see things for myself. My husband and I toured, jotting down the sights and sounds I heard and recording my impressions to help re-create London for my readers. We explored the buildings and monuments and cathedrals that define the city, like St. Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, the Houses of Parliament, and Buckingham Palace. The iconic red double-decker buses still take Londoners where they need to go, but we did most of our traveling on foot or on the Underground. The "Tube" is now very modern and easy to navigate (unless you're color-blind, like my husband), but I don't think I would have enjoyed sleeping down there every night with bombs falling overhead. We visited the Imperial War Museum and sat inside a tiny Anderson shelter during a simulated bombing, and I sympathized with Eve's claustrophobia. Another display in that museum took me inside a typical London house, re-created from that time period.

Once I was back home and ready to begin writing, I gathered photographs from my trip and pictures photocopied from research books and created an inspiration board. When I sat down to write each day, my characters and settings were right in front of me. Believe it or not, I don't plot out my stories. My research provides plenty of ideas for things that might happen, but it's more fun for me to make up the story as I go along. If I'm surprised by what happens, I'm hoping readers will be, too!

As I read accounts of what the British people endured and the courage they displayed in refusing to surrender, I kept asking myself what I would have done. Would my faith have proven strong enough, or might it have faltered? None of us will really know how we'll react until our faith is put to the test. But if and when it is, I am certain of one thing—we'll have a marvelous opportunity to see and experience God's faithfulness.

Lynn



CREATING *the* ATMOSPHERE

FOOD

Early in the book, Eve Dawson shares her picnic lunch with Audrey Clarkson in the woods—a sausage roll and a scone with currants. Later, Audrey reciprocates and invites Eve to tea at Wellingford Hall. A typical British tea would have finger sandwiches (cream cheese, cucumber, egg, salmon, etc.) and sweets, such as fairy cakes (small cupcakes drizzled with icing) and scones with marmalade.

Recipes for the following can easily be found online!

- English sausage roll
- Scone with currants
- Scone with marmalade
- English tea sandwiches
- Fairy cakes

Don't forget the tea! Either research the way to brew a proper pot of tea from fresh leaves or take a shortcut and offer a variety of fine tea bags (mum's the word!).



DECOR

Get your book group members in a WWII British state of mind: do a quick internet search for the following images, print them off, and hang them around your venue.

1. British flags
2. Images of British ration books
3. Government posters from the day, which fell into three categories: urging women to do their part by working in factories or joining the army; warning of the possibility of spies and calling for secrecy (“Keep Mum” and “Loose Lips Sink Ships”); encouraging people to make do with less (“Save Wheat and Help the Fleet”).
4. The ever-popular slogan “Keep Calm and Carry On”

MUSIC

American big-band music was very popular in Britain, especially after the “invasion” of US troops before D-Day. A Google search of popular music from the 1940s will show a nice mix of swing tunes and romantic ballads like the ones Eve and Audrey danced to with their American GIs, Louis and Robert. Some examples of popular artists include Glenn Miller, the Andrews Sisters, Benny Goodman, Bing Crosby, and Harry James. Create a playlist of your favorites to play in the background before your discussion of the book begins!



GAME IF I WERE YOU *trivia*

How good is your memory? Give your group ten minutes to answer the questions below. Have a small prize ready, or just give bragging rights to the person who gets the most correct answers!

Find the answers on page 8.

1. What is Eve's grandmother's name?
2. What fruit does Eve share with Audrey at the beginning of the story?
3. What is the name of Audrey's family boat that the two women take to Dunkirk?
4. What is the name of Eve's typist friend who disappears during the London Blitz?
5. What is the name of the type of shelter that Audrey's family has built in the backyard of their London house?
6. What nickname did their high school classmates give to Louis, Tom, Arnie, and Robert?
7. Why is the Unknown Warrior's tomb important to Eve?
8. Where do Eve and Alfie go on their first date?
9. What is Audrey's link to the British peerage?
10. What movie star does Tom Vandenberg remind Eve of?
11. What are Robert's family's ambitions for him?
12. Whom do the girls lose in the Blitz?
13. Why won't Alfie marry Eve?
14. What kind of bomb injures Eve and Audrey?
15. Where are Audrey and Robert married?

"Lynn Austin is a master at exploring the depths of human relationships. Set against the backdrop of war and its aftermath, *If I Were You* is a beautifully woven page-turner."

SUSAN MEISSNER, bestselling author of *Secrets of a Charmed Life* and *The Last Year of the War*

QUESTION & ANSWER *with* LYNN AUSTIN

1. ***If I Were You* is your twenty-seventh novel. Anything different about writing this one than your third or tenth? Has it gotten easier? Harder?**

This book was more challenging to write because it's my first novel (aside from my biblical fiction) to take place mainly in another country, outside the US. I had to study British history, not American, then step outside my familiar culture to describe manners, ways of speaking and thinking, and so forth. It was more challenging but fun.

2. **How do you hope this novel will resonate with your audience? What are you most excited for your readers to experience through reading this story?**

I want to take readers into the past, to help them experience a small taste of what it was like to live through the daily uncertainties of wartime. As much as we may like our world to stay exactly the same, it seldom does. But it's in difficult times that we often begin to discover God's plan and purpose for our lives—like Eve and Audrey did. Instead of envying someone else's life, I hope readers will take a closer look at their own unique gifts and strengths.

3. **Why do you usually write historical fiction versus contemporary?**

I write historical fiction because I love history, especially the little-known stories of ordinary people. For me, reading about the past and how people like me lived lives of courage

in difficult times helps me live a life of faith and grace with God's help. When we travel back in history through novels, I think it's easier to see how God used tragic events as part of His redemption story. And that new perspective gives us faith to believe that He is still working now and that our lives can play a part in His story today.

4. **Have you always wanted to be a writer?**

I majored in psychology in college with the hope of becoming a clinical psychologist. Human behavior and the intricacies of personal relationships have always fascinated me—and those are now themes that I love to explore in my novels. I sat down and tried my hand at writing when I was a stay-at-home mother with young children, and I quickly discovered how much I loved creating characters and stories. I never thought about being a psychologist again. I like to think that my novels can play a small part in helping people deal with pain and loss and the relationships in their lives.

5. **What's coming next?**

My next novel (still untitled) will once again take readers to the home front during WWII, but this time to the Netherlands. It tells the stories of three very different women whose lives are forever changed by the Nazi invasion and occupation of their neutral nation in May 1940. Each of them must choose whether to collaborate with their enemies, passively adjust to Nazi rule, or actively fight back against the takeover of their homeland.

“I have long enjoyed Lynn Austin's novels, but *If I Were You* resonates above all others. Austin weaves the plot and characters together with sheer perfection, and the ending—oh, pure delight to a reader's heart!”

TAMERA ALEXANDER, bestselling author of *With This Pledge* and *A Note Yet Unsung*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Belonging, home, and family are recurring themes in *If I Were You*. How do Eve and Audrey each experience these things throughout the book? How does their desire to belong and to have a home and a family motivate the decisions each young woman makes?
2. Which of the characters did you more easily identify with, Eve or Audrey? Why?
3. How do Eve and Audrey respond differently to adversity? To love? Give examples from the story. What accounts for their differences? Is it nature, nurture, or a combination of both?
4. The author uses Eve and Audrey to contrast the different classes in Britain prior to World War II. Describe the different lifestyles and expectations the girls and their families have. How does each girl grow and change as a result of their friendship?
5. Part of what Eve and Audrey learn is that the roles expected of them by society and their families don't necessarily reflect what God wants for them. What purpose might God have for your life that could differ from the expectations of society or family? What relationships has He placed in your life that have helped you—or could help you—to discover His plans for you?
6. The author also contrasts the way the war affected Britain and the way it affected America. Eve notes in 1946 that “America’s prosperity astounded her. There were no piles of rubble where homes once stood, no queues for food, no shortages. Soldiers like Robert and Louis had returned home to civilian life as if the war had never happened.” She tells Audrey that no one ever asks her about life during the war, that Americans seem to have the attitude that “the war is over and done with, and we’d all be better off to forget about it.” In what ways is it helpful to be able to share about traumatic experiences we’ve had? Why is it hard for us to want to hear about the challenges others have faced? Think about times you’ve been on either side of this situation—how have you responded?
7. Eve blames Audrey’s mother for the death of her own mother. Do you think Eve’s reaction to her mother’s death is fair? How does she eventually come to terms with it?
8. While urging Audrey to pay attention to her evolving feelings for Robert, Eve tells her, “The war has erased the rules and traditions we grew up with.” What does she mean? Can you think of any examples from contemporary culture that are parallel to this? Have those changes been good or detrimental?
9. Eve is adamant about not having intimate relations with Alfie without the security of marriage, despite his pressure and her fears for his safety. What has changed by the time she meets Louis? Why does she make a different choice with him?
10. When Audrey visits her uncle in London in 1950, she debates whether to tell him the truth about her parentage. She decides not to, concluding that some secrets are better left hidden. Do you agree? How would you have handled the news Audrey had just received from her father?
11. Why does Audrey decide not to go to America when she first has the chance? What changes her mind later? Have you ever had second thoughts about a major life decision? Is it ever too late to change your path?
12. Were you surprised by Tom’s advice to Louis to not tell his wife about his affair with Eve during the war? How is this different from Audrey’s situation regarding her parents—or is it? Would the advice be different today than it was in the mid-twentieth century?
13. What did you think of Eve’s decision not to tell Louis about their child when she meets him again? Would you have done anything differently if you were in her situation?
14. Near the end of the book, Eve seems to believe that her circumstances are God’s punishment for past actions—for her affair with Louis, for turning away from God. Have you or someone you care about ever felt that way? How can we know that God does not punish us for our sins once we have repented and accepted His forgiveness? If He’s not punishing us, why do we still have to live with the consequences of our wrong choices?
15. Mrs. Vandenberg tells Eve, “There will be days when you’ll be tempted to doubt that you are a new person, days when you’ll be very hard on yourself. Especially as you face the painful consequences of your mistakes.” Have you ever found it difficult to accept God’s forgiveness? What has helped you?

“Desperation and forgiveness are part of a classic upstairs/downstairs plot . . . [in this] tantalizing domestic drama.”

ANSWERS IF I WERE YOU *trivia*

No peeking! Turn this page upside down to see the correct answers from the trivia game on page 5.

1. What is Eve's grandmother's name?
Answer: Granny Maud

2. What fruit does Eve share with Audrey at the beginning of the story?
Answer: Fresh strawberries

3. What is the name of Audrey's family boat that the two women take to Dunkirk?
Answer: The Rosamunde

4. What is the name of Eve's typist friend who disappears during the London Blitz?
Answer: Iris

5. What is the name of the type of shelter that Audrey's family has built in the backyard of their London house?
Answer: Anderson shelter

6. What nickname did their high school classmates give to Louis, Tom, Arnie, and Robert?
Answer: The Famous Four

7. Why is the Unknown Warrior's tomb important to Eve?
Answer: It could be her father, who died at the Battle of Amiens, who is buried there

8. Where do Eve and Alfie go on their first date?
Answer: He wants to take her to a formal event at the Savoy, but she suggests tea and a stroll in the park instead

9. What is Audrey's link to the British peerage?
Answer: Her maternal grandfather was an earl

10. What movie star does Tom Vandenberg remind Eve of?
Answer: Jimmy Stewart

11. What are Robert's family's ambitions for him?
Answer: To become a lawyer and marry Linda

12. Whom do the girls lose in the Blitz?
Answer: Both of their mothers; Eve's friend Iris

13. Why won't Alfie marry Eve?
Answer: He fears being disinherited

14. What kind of bomb injures Eve and Audrey?
Answer: A V-1, also called a doodlebug

15. Where are Audrey and Robert married?
Answer: In the hospital

DON'T
MISS



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one is trying to figure out how to live, the other how to die.

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