

*This reading group guide for **Almost Home** includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Pam Jenoff. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.*

## **Introduction**

From bestselling author and Quill award nominee Pam Jenoff comes a rich and suspenseful novel about a woman who must face a past she'd rather forget in order to uncover a dangerous legacy that threatens her future.

Ten years ago, American Jordan Weiss's idyllic experience as a graduate student and coxswain at Cambridge was shattered when her boyfriend and fellow crewmember, Jared Short, drowned in the River Cam the night before the biggest race of the year. Since that time, Jordan, now a State Department intelligence officer, has traveled the world on dangerous assignments but has managed to avoid returning to face her painful memories in England. When her terminally ill friend Sarah asks her to come to London, though, Jordan finds herself requesting a transfer to the one place she swore she'd never go again.

Jordan quickly discovers that Jared's death indeed was not an accident, and that his research on World War II had uncovered a shameful secret. But powerful forces with everything to lose will stop at nothing to keep the past buried. Soon, Jordan finds herself in grave peril as she struggles to find the answers that lie treacherously close to home, the truth that threatens to change her life forever, and the love that makes it all worth fighting for.

## **Questions and Topics for Discussion**

1. While at Cambridge, Jordan was the only American in her group of friends. Did she feel fully accepted by her teammates, or was the fact that she was an American or a woman ever an obstacle? Did Jordan ever pretend to be someone she wasn't?
2. "Chris once teased me about my sentimentality over what he called 'a silly children's film' [*Mary Poppins*]. Still, perhaps he purposely chose our meeting place so close to the cathedral, since he knows how much I loved it" (pg. 62). Was this Chris's plan? Does he attempt to manipulate Jordan throughout the novel?
3. After briefly reuniting with Chris, Jordan flees and notes "This is the second time I have fled in two days, and it isn't like me" (pg. 72). Is this statement accurate? Consider Jordan's career, which doesn't allow her to stay in one place too long.
4. Jordan states that the only reason she returned to England was to care for her sick friend Sarah. However, she doesn't spend much time with Sarah upon arriving. Is she simply too busy with work and finding the truth about Jared? What other reasons could there be?

5. Both Chris and Jordan note how driven Jared was. Why was he so determined to seek the truth?
6. “A meeting would provide an emergency escape hatch if the day in Cambridge got to be too much” (pg. 87). Are there other examples in the book of Jordan taking precautions to protect herself? Do you think these measures are a result of Jared’s death, her work with the State Department, or something else?
7. Jared remarks to Jordan that Chris “can’t stand going home alone” (pg. 126). Is this true? If so, why? And why doesn’t Chris openly share his feelings with Jordan, either before her relationship with Jared or a decade later?
8. “Social justice, my father told me once at Passover, was our obligation as Jews, to free all people from the bonds of oppression as we had once been freed” (pg. 189). Is this desire what drives Jordan? Even though she says she’s not religious, in what other ways might her religion shape who Jordan has become?
9. What could be the reason for Jared strangling Jordan while the two are both sleeping?
10. Why does Mo acquiesce to Ambassador Raines? How much of his plan was she aware of?
11. Several people end up betraying Jordan. When did you first become suspicious of these characters or the novel’s other twists? Is there anyone Jordan can truly trust?

### **Enhance Your Book Club**

1. Cambridge plays an essential role as the novel’s backdrop. Learn more about this historic university by visiting the official website, [www.cam.ac.uk/](http://www.cam.ac.uk/), and this one dedicated to the school’s 800th anniversary: [www.800.cam.ac.uk/](http://www.800.cam.ac.uk/).
2. Jordan’s friend Sarah suffers from A.L.S. To find out more about this terminal disease and how you can help fight for a cure, visit Project A.L.S. ([www.projectals.org/](http://www.projectals.org/)) or other charitable websites.
3. To learn more about Pam Jenoff, her previous novels, and upcoming appearances, visit her official website at [www.pamjenoff.com](http://www.pamjenoff.com).

### **A Conversation with Pam Jenoff**

Q: Like Jordan, you also worked for the State Department. What compelled you to take that position? Were you ever deployed on dangerous missions? Can you tell us about some of the work you did, and your travels?

A: I took the Foreign Service exam at the American Embassy in London while I was still a graduate student at Cambridge. It was something of a whim—I had always wanted to take the test, which I regarded as sort of a standardized exam for international affairs majors (I had been one as an undergrad at George Washington University), to see how I would do. To my surprise, I

passed the written test. Months later, when I returned to the United States, I took the oral examination and passed that too. Having had such a wonderful experience in England, I was very eager to live abroad again. I served only one tour with the State Department in Krakow, Poland, from 1996 to 1998. It wasn't dangerous, but it was just a few years after communism had ended in Eastern Europe—there were some hardships, like weather and pollution and lack of some consumer products, but it was an exciting time and place full of political and social change and energy. I took advantage of my time there to travel throughout the Polish countryside and some of the still developing parts of Eastern Europe.

Q: What did you enjoy most about your time at Cambridge? Were you a coxswain, as well?

A: I enjoyed almost everything about Cambridge; my two years there were among the best I've had so far. The thing I enjoyed most were the deep friendships I formed with many British classmates, which endure to this day, as well as the idyllic setting. I felt blessed to be there every single day. I was a coxswain for my college boat club and we were on the water six days a week. The rowing culture was a huge part of my Cambridge experience.

Q: Besides attending Cambridge and your work in the State Department, are there any other parallels between Jordan and yourself?

A: I don't regard Jordan to be an autobiographical character. If anything, I admire her in that I think she is much tougher and cooler than me. But there is a part of me that would love to be on the open road, traveling from place to place as she does, and I think we are both influenced heavily by the places we have lived and been.

Q: *Almost Home* takes many twists and turns, and not everyone is who he or she seems. How far in advance did you plan the storyline? Was every surprise mapped out before you began writing? Tell us about your writing process.

A: The idea for *Almost Home* arose more than a decade ago when I was still living in Poland. I was traveling through Spain with a Polish friend and an American friend, and one night as we were lying awake in our hotel room, I began mapping out a story of a young woman whose boyfriend had died mysteriously years earlier at Cambridge. I didn't know then that she was a diplomat or anything more about the plot. I put the idea aside for several years while my first two books came to fruition, but I was so glad to have the chance to finally return to it and learn the many secrets and surprises. My books tend to be character driven and the characters "tell" me the story, so I often learn many truths as I am writing.

Q: Even though Jordan says she is not religious, you included the passage about Passover. Why did you include this piece of Jordan's background?

A: I think that "not religious" is a matter of self-perception—all of us have different relationships with religion and faith at different times in our lives. Jordan, while quite secular, has been influenced by her experiences as a Jewish woman, both from childhood and elsewhere, and reflections such as hers about Passover show that her religious and cultural background inevitably influence who she is now.

Q: World affairs play an important role in *Almost Home*. Did you do a lot of research on geopolitics, or did your work at the Pentagon and State Department fully prepare you? During your time there, were you aware of any similar schemes to what Jared uncovered?

A: The scheme uncovered by Jared in the book is wholly fictional and there were no parallels in my work for the government! That said, speaking as a private citizen, I think that it is easy to see in today's geopolitical framework how the ties between government and industry could lead to such corruption. I did a lot of research into the political issues that arise in the book and then took things several steps further as creative license.

Q: How would you describe Jordan and Jared's relationship? Why are they drawn to each other?

A: Jordan and Jared are two people who, on the surface, are an improbable couple. They don't really like each other or seem to have much in common beyond the rowing. But beneath the surface, there are some deep and powerful similarities: their independent natures and their difficulty letting people in. I think that's why, once they find each other, their bond is so powerful.

Q: Why did you decide to leave your work in the Foreign Service to return to law school and become an attorney?

A: I loved the Foreign Service and still think it is the finest work done by the most wonderful people in the world. At the same time, I didn't come to that career with the same focus as some of my peers—I tried it on a whim, whereas many of the others had aspired to it for years. And once I was in diplomatic service, I realized that it meant spending most of my career overseas. While I love being abroad, I am a huge family person, and seeing my family just once a year wasn't going to work for me. It also seemed like, as a woman, it could be quite difficult to have a family in the Foreign Service, to find a partner who was willing to relocate with you every few years and uproot the family each time, and giving up a family was not a sacrifice I was willing to make. And when I looked outside the Foreign Service, I had a master's degree in history and not a lot of job skills that translated readily into gainful employment back home. I decided law

would be the field that would offer me the most flexibility in working domestic or international, public sector or private. I also thought it would help me become a better writer. I took the LSATs in London while still living in Krakow and did well so I decided to go to law school. I happily could have done several more diplomatic tours but I had a sense that if I was going to go back to school, I should do it sooner rather than later, so I left the Foreign Service to study law.

Q: *Almost Home* is less historical than readers of *The Diplomat's Wife* and *The Kommandant's Girl* may have come to expect. Why did you decide to go in this direction and how do you think readers will react?

A: When I started seriously writing novels, I had two ideas: one for *Almost Home*, which was modern, and one for *The Kommandant's Girl*, which was historical. I took both to my writing class, and my peers responded slightly better to *The Kommandant's Girl*, so I pursued that and ultimately published that and the sequel. So it just happened that my first published book was historical, but I never set out to be a historical writer, and I try to the extent possible to avoid being defined by genre.

I think that readers of my first two, more historical, books will greatly enjoy *Almost Home* because it has so many of the same elements: a strong female protagonist, romance, international intrigue, and adventure, plus a compelling historical backstory. Despite the differing time period, it really is a very similar type of book.

Q: Did you leave the novel open-ended with the intention of writing a sequel? If so, what can we expect from Jordan's next journey? Or are you working on something else?

A: I ended *Almost Home* at this particular spot because that's where the story ended, and I would have been fine with leaving the open questions to the reader's imagination. But I do think it provides fertile ground for a sequel, and that's what I am working on presently. I think the sequel, *Elegy*, will provide many of the elements readers of *Almost Home* enjoy: more about Jordan embarking on another exciting adventure while answering the unresolved questions from the first book. But at the same time the new book will be a different sort of quest, more focused on Jordan figuring out who she is as a woman and what she wants from the future, even as she wraps up issues from the past.