

A Note From Adriana Allegri

Dear Reader,

When asked how *The Sunflower House* came to be, I usually start by saying the book was twenty years in the making. But the more I think about it, the more I realize this novel's roots go back to my childhood. As a first-generation American with parents who lived in Europe during World War II, I grew up listening to stories about small acts of kindness, and how kindness can create miracles during hard times

Like Allina and Katrine, I also grew up in the shadow of family secrets.

My mother's name was Germana and she was born in 1942. I never met my grandfather. He got his family from Italy to the United States after the war but drank himself to death by the age of fifty, long before I was born. I wondered what type of man my grandfather was, what he believed—and what that might mean for me. While my mother always made her loathing for Hitler and Mussolini clear, she wouldn't discuss those topics in any detail when I asked, which was not typical of her.

Maybe my mom knew the answers but wanted to protect me. Perhaps she never knew the truth herself. In any case, it's unsurprising that the prologue of this novel, which came in a dream twenty-odd years ago, focused on family secrets. I was a high school teacher on summer break and woke up crying, with Katrine's voice in my head, clear as a bell. I ran to my computer and dashed out the draft in less than an hour. The epilogue came two weeks later, also in a dream.

Then the research began. I stumbled across an online article about the *Lebensborn* program and when I dug deeper, the whole thing sounded unbelievable. Breeding centers where SS officers mated with Aryan women to perpetuate the so-called master race? How was it possible, I thought, that a novel hadn't been written about this? Further research uncovered several nonfiction texts, all out of print. I managed to track down one at a used bookstore, and the information in it was chilling and heartbreaking. I discovered other essential sources at the U.S. Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC.

Some of the most important research was on the role of women in Nazi Germany. It was fascinating and repulsive, learning how women were marginalized and kept powerless, and how National Socialism targeted teenaged girls with propaganda. Women were hailed in public and gifted medals and economic benefits for becoming, essentially, breeders for the Reich.

Keep in mind that I come from a long line of strong women. Both my mother and grandmother were young widows, and they ran businesses to help keep their families afloat at a time when that wasn't as common as it is today. They were fierce—loving and compassionate, but tough. No self-congratulations or bluster about their accomplishments either, just strength, hard work, and faith they were doing the right thing.

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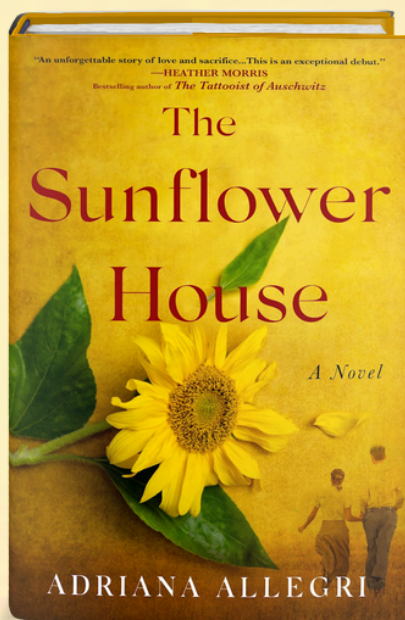
So the idea of women in pursuit of power during that time period, clawing their way to the top of the pile no matter the cost to others, was intriguing—and a key to the characters of Marguerite and Berta, along with other women portrayed in *Hochland Home*. In contrast, I loved a protagonist who wielded authentic power instead of brute force or selfish calculation. That was vital—to show compassion as strength, a moral compass to help those in need, and the ability to forgive and love again after loss. It doesn't take a psychology degree to work out that Allina was very much like my female role models, the powerful women who inspired me as a child.

To say it's been a long road to publication is an understatement. There were times along the way when I thought this book might never be. Although Allina's story is one of love, resistance, persistence, and triumph over evil, the material in this novel is challenging and its themes are sensitive ones. We can't afford to dismiss the darkness that spread like a disease during that period—or refuse to see when echoes of that darkness arise today. It's crucial to bring these issues into the light so we can examine our own thoughts and prejudices.

I'm overjoyed this book is being published by St. Martin's Press and feel very fortunate to share Allina's story with you. It's been a labor of love and I'm more grateful than I can say.

Adriana Allegri

—Adriana Allegri



@adrianaallegri

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