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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

American Spy by Laura Wilkinson

Summary

What if your sense of duty required you to betray the man you love?

It's 1986, the heart of the Cold War, and Marie Mitchell is an intelligence officer with the FBI. She's brilliant, but she's also a young black woman working in an old boys' club. Her career has stalled out, she's overlooked for every high-profile squad, and her days are filled with monotonous paperwork. So when she's given the opportunity to join a shadowy task force aimed at undermining Thomas Sankara, the charismatic revolutionary president of Burkina Faso whose Communist ideology has made him a target for American intervention, she says yes. Yes, even though she secretly admires the work Sankara is doing for his country. Yes, even though she is still grieving the mysterious death of her sister, whose example led Marie to this career path in the first place. Yes, even though a furious part of her suspects she's being offered the job because of her appearance and not her talent.

In the year that follows, Marie will observe Sankara, seduce him, and ultimately have a hand in the coup that will bring him down. But doing so will change everything she believes about what it means to be a spy, a lover, a sister, and a good American. (from the publisher.)

Discussion Questions

1. What did you think of the style in which Wilkinson wrote the book, as a letter to Marie's sons?
2. What challenges does Marie face as a black woman in the FBI?
3. "We hold women to an unfair double standard," Marie is told by Ed Ross when being recruited for a mission abroad. Why does it frustrate her to hear it coming from him?
4. Wilkinson writes that Marie's mother "passed" as a white woman, while her father was a visible leader in the black community. How does this affect Marie's own perspective on race and identity?
5. Early in the book, Marie writes of her FBI colleagues: "[U]nlike me, they weren't people who'd had their existence politicized on their behalf." How does this resonate for you amid

conversations about race in the U.S. taking place today? What do you make of her depiction of U.S. race relations?

6. Marie speaks about the effect of “Cold War terror” on the psychology of her generation. How does growing up during this period affect her career choices?
7. “One thing I can say for sure is that I don’t want you to be moral absolutists,” Marie writes to her sons. Does her approach to morality change throughout the novel?
8. How much is Marie’s decision to go to Burkina Faso driven by the loss of her sister, Helene?
9. How do Marie’s feelings about her mission change after she learns from Daniel Slater that she is not, in fact, working for the CIA?
10. What did you think of Marie’s interest in Thomas Sankara’s socialist ideology? Did his politics play a role in her attraction to him?
11. Do you find Marie patriotic?
12. What elements of the plot surprised you the most? What questions remained at the end?
13. How did this novel compare with other depictions of the Cold War-era that you’ve read or watched?
14. What ideas or stereotypes about the CIA and FBI does Wilkinson challenge in her book?
15. Does Wilkinson’s book subvert the typical spy thriller genre? If so, how??

Discussion Questions from PBS.org