



THE MELODY OF SECRETS

JEFFREY STEPAKOFF

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ABOUT THE BOOK:

Jeffrey Stepakoff's *The Melody of Secrets* is an epic love story set against the 1960s U.S. space program, when deeply-buried secrets could threaten not just a marriage, but a country.

Maria was barely eighteen as WWII was coming to its explosive end. A brilliant violinist, she tried to comfort herself with the Sibelius Concerto as American bombs rained down. James Cooper wasn't much older. A roguish fighter pilot stationed in London, he was shot down during a daring night raid and sought shelter in Maria's cottage.

Fifteen years later, in Huntsville, Alabama, Maria is married to a German rocket scientist who works for the burgeoning U.S. space program. Her life in the South is at peace, purposefully distanced from her past. Everything is as it should be—until James Cooper walks back into it.

Pulled from the desert airfield where he was testing planes no sane Air Force pilot would touch, and drinking a bit too much, Cooper is offered the chance to work for the government, and move himself to the front of the line for the astronaut program. He soon realizes that his job is to report not only on the rocket engines but also on the scientists developing them. Then Cooper learns secrets that could shatter Maria's world...

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. As the bombs fall in the opening of the book, Maria calms herself with her music. Do you have any activities or avocations in which you engage when you need to escape from reality?
2. Do you think the U.S. government was justified in using former Nazi scientists to build our space program? Do you think our government was correct to conceal their true identity from the public (i.e. Operation Paperclip)?



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3. Before coming to Huntsville, Maria and Sabine lived in a country whose men shot at Penny and Carolyn's fathers and brothers and husbands, and meticulously planned and carried out worse. Do you think it's possible for the German and American women to ever truly put this behind them and build relationships that transcend the past?
4. Hans tells Maria that when he was a boy he dreamed of space. Do you think the pursuit of this noble dream excuses his work for the German military on the V2? Do you think it warranted his use of slave labor in the concentration camps to develop and build this rocket – which later became the cornerstone of America's nuclear deterrent and carried astronauts to the moon?
5. Von Braun tells Cooper the reason he chose to give the V2 technology to the Americans (as opposed to the Russians) is because that kind of power must only go to a people guided by the Bible. Do you think a man who knew all about – and probably oversaw – the brutalities at the Dora concentration camp could also be religious?
6. Maria doesn't feel true passion for Hans – not the kind she harbors for Cooper – but she still loves her husband. Do you think that kind of love is satisfactory for a woman? Do you think it's enough for a meaningful and fruitful marriage?
7. Do you think you could survive for a long period of time in a shelter? Could you survive only with your spouse? What exactly would you want to keep with you?
8. The short time Maria and Cooper spent in the cabin changed them forever. Do you think this kind of passion between people is possible? If so, what do you think causes it? Have you ever experienced this kind of emotional connection?
9. When she first meets Cooper, Maria points out that although slavery no longer exists in America, the US Air Force is still segregated. What are the similarities and/or differences between racism in Nazi Germany and racism in 1940s/1950s America?
10. Penny explains to Maria that African-Americans are not allowed as guests at the Russel Erskin Hotel. How is this kind of racism different from or similar to what Maria experiences when the gas station attendant refuses to pump her gas because she is German?
11. Novelist and activist Elie Wiesel says that a person who is indifferent to the suffering of others is complicit in the crime. What do you think about Maria's decision to make a stand and not play in the concert? Would you do such a thing, even if it put you and your family at risk? What do you think causes indifference in certain people but not in others?



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12. Do you think Maria was right in how she handled her relationship with Josephine? Do you think she should have inserted herself more in the girl's life, despite protestation from Sam?
13. Do you think Maria was in fact able to "repair the world" through her actions at the end of the book? Do you think she was right to accept Hans' words and stay with him?
14. Do you think through his work Hans can ever experience true repentance and forgiveness?
15. Maria's last words in the novel are to her son. What do you think she tells him? And what actions do you think occur because of what she says?

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