



A Star for Mrs. Blake

April Smith

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The United States Congress in 1929 passed legislation to fund travel for mothers of the fallen soldiers of World War I to visit their sons' graves in France. Over the next three years, 6,693 Gold Star Mothers made the trip. In this emotionally charged, brilliantly realized novel, April Smith breathes life into a unique moment in American history, imagining the experience of five of these women.

They are strangers at the start, but their lives will become inextricably intertwined, altered in indelible ways. These very different Gold Star Mothers travel to the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery to say final good-byes to their sons and come together along the way to face the unexpected: a death, a scandal, and a secret revealed.

None of these pilgrims will be as affected as Cora Blake, who has lived almost her entire life in a small fishing village off the coast of Maine, caring for her late sister's three daughters, hoping to fill the void left by the death of her son, Sammy, who was killed on a scouting mission during the final days of the war. Cora believes she is managing as well as can be expected in the midst of the Depression, but nothing has prepared her for what lies ahead on this unpredictable journey, including an extraordinary encounter with an expatriate American journalist, Griffin Reed, who was wounded in the trenches and hides behind a metal mask, one of hundreds of "tin noses" who became symbols of the war.

With expert storytelling, memorable characters, and beautiful prose, April Smith gives us a timeless story, by turns heartwarming and heartbreaking, set against a footnote of history—little known, yet unforgettable.

A Star for Mrs. Blake Details

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From Reader Review A Star for Mrs. Blake for online ebook

Amanda says

I thought this was a fantastic premise for a book. I was familiar with the concept of stars in the window for sons (and now daughters!) serving abroad and with the gold stars for those who lost a son during World Wars I and II, but I was not familiar with the government sponsored pilgrimages of these mothers to the graves of their sons. Its kind of amazing that our government did that-and really what an undertaking that must have been. (This short article is interesting for further reading.) I liked that the group we follow in the book, Party A, is made up of such very different women, the maid, the socialite, the Jewish farmer's wife and the widowed Mrs. Blake. I believe that's one of the good things about our military-all walks of life meet up together. Unfortunately, these soldiers died together, the mothers' grief becomes a uniting factor across class, religion and race.

I think Smith got too carried away with her subjects and what could have been an interesting and touching story was too bogged down by extraneous details and side stories. If Smith had been able to narrow down her focus I think she could have also done more to keep her characters real and language true to the time period. It felt like every character you met had a back story, and they just didn't matter. I would rather have gone deeper into a few issues, such as the separation of the white and African American mothers, than have read about the history of the Army General who planned the pilgrimages. The fact that there is a "death, a scandal, a secret revealed" on the journey should be enough to keep the reader engrossed without overloading on irrelevant information.

There were passages in this book that I found quite moving, especially as the mothers visited the cemetery where their sons were buried and later the battlefield where they died. But the best parts of the writing I had to search for in between the trivial details or language that seemed to anachronistic to me. I was invested in Mrs. Blake's story as well as Bobbie's and Wilhelmina's, and I wish I had been able to be more interested in the other mothers. This was definitely worth a read for the historical perspective and a different kind of women's story.

<http://guninactone.wordpress.com/2014...>

Jonathan says

I'd never heard of a federally funded pilgrimage of World War 1 gold star mothers to the graves of their sons in Europe, but there was such a program apparently. I find that fact more moving than the novel which just did not do it for me. Aspects of the descriptions and relationships were well done, but then certain scenes between the principle characters would feel just a bit dull somehow and the devices employed to move the plot along were too convenient. And then in the end it was all wrapped up far too neatly with big bows to make us all happy in the end, despite the deaths of two major characters with whom we were supposed to feel sympathy.

So, an interesting read, but I cannot recommend it much.

It would not surprise me, however, if this is made into a decent movie eventually, as the scenery and costumes would be compelling. The rocky shore of Maine, crossing the Atlantic on an ocean liner, Paris, the ruins of Verdun, the fields of France! a beautiful nurse! a handsome liaison officer, a disfigured veteran with a beautifully painted tin facial prosthesis, the beautiful graves in endless rows in a summer field.... Divert

from the book a bit to throw in some flashbacks to wartime scenes of how the Doughboys were killed, show a nightclub scene and a glimpse of a morphine syringe and you have a blockbuster that would appeal to quite a few coveted demographics. The movie will be better than the book.

Quiltgranny says

A truly dismaying book. I felt like I was following a labrador running hither and yon - look there's a squirrel! The book is supposedly based on the diary of a military man whose first assignment upon graduating West Point was to escort a group of Gold Star mothers to Verdun. The author couldn't decide if this was to be more historically based (it wasn't), a story about the sacrifices that mothers made for the war (repeated ad nauseam), or a romance (little of it). There were too many non-essential characters introduced with all their quirkiness, and very poorly constructed sentences and paragraphs which led me to re-read numerous times just to figure out who/what was being discussed.

I only finished this because I couldn't see how far I was in the book on my Kindle app.

Judy says

What I love about reading historical fiction is that I'm constantly learning. It is like going to school without having to take tests and writing papers. This is exemplified by "A Star for Mrs. Blake." I had never heard that the United States Government planned, paid for and escorted over 6500 mothers of men who were killed in WWI to France where their sons were buried. That fact itself made the book important to me. Additionally, the book is a delightful fictionalized read where we become involved in the lives of a quartet of strangers who make the trip to France together.

Cora Blake, who is the main character, comes from a small fishing village off the coast of Maine, and cares for her late sister's three daughters. Her young son, Sammy, was killed at the last of the war. April Smith writes beautifully and gives life to the characters, especially Cora. I could almost feel the chill of the wind and the desolation on the Main coast. When they come to the wreckage of the countryside that was caused by the war, I was again made aware of the terrible loss of life and landscape that such a senseless war caused.

These four women don't get along too well together, but ties are made through trying circumstances. They have the bond of their losses to bind them together. Other interesting people round out the story, among them a journalist who lost most of his face during the war--another grim reminder.

As a historian, I had to delve deeper into this bit of history. I recommend anyone interested check out this website: www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~txmatago/g...

There is another book I will try to read: "The Gold Star Mother Pilgrimages of the 1930s" by John Graham. Our library has it as Reference.

Suzanne says

I was extremely disappointed in this book, especially since it has been chosen as Cincinnati's "On the Same

Page" book for this year. I was anxious to learn more about the WW1 Gold Star Mothers and their pilgrimage to France, but this book is so poorly written, the plot so clumsy, and the characters so cliché that I finally gave up on it.

Courtney says

I received an ARC of this book in exchange for an honest review.

I had mixed feelings about this book. It was certainly a well written and compelling story. April Smith is clearly a very talented woman. The characters were believable, and true to history. I even kind of liked the way that the point of view would switch from character to character with little fanfare. I was able to easily be lost in the memories of Cora and the other mothers as they recounted the fondest memories of their boys or the path that brought them to France. I laughed when I read about Cora's experiences in Maine. Having once lived on an island very close to Deer Isle, all I had to do was close my eyes and I could see the fishing boats, the rocky beaches, and cranberry bogs. I could smell the low tide and the lobster traps. I knew what it meant to be "leaf season" and I knew exactly what they meant when they talked about people "from away". Being able to visualize the setting and empathize with the characters is usually all it takes for me to enjoy a book. Unfortunately, along with the beautiful imagery and the compelling relationships was a streak of vulgarity that I will never understand nor appreciate. I will never be able to comprehend the need that some authors seem to feel to include foul language and sexual innuendo in an otherwise wonderful storyline. Instead of enjoying myself I was dreading the next time certain words would come up. They seemed to leap off of the page and it was all I could do to keep reading. I would feel comfortable for a chapter or two and then let my guard down just to see something pop up again, and it felt like a punch in the gut every time.

I fully acknowledge and understand that a lot of people use the kind of language found in this book, and use it far more frequently than I had to read it in this novel. They may even call me naive and sheltered for choosing not to have them be part of my usable vocabulary. I also realize that some people think that these kinds of elements add "realism" or "authenticity" to a story. But to me, it's not realistic and not the world in which I choose to live. I have never, in my life, met a person who said, "you know, that book was really good, but it could have used a lot more vulgarity and sex." People like me don't want "edgy" or "risqué". We want entertainment that teaches, enlightens, and lifts us up. If it can't do that than it should, at the very least, be family friendly. I never want to read a book that I would be embarrassed to have my children read over my shoulder (because they often do). It's not appropriate and as such I cannot recommend this book.

Leeann says

This is a book that I thought was okay while I read it, but appreciated it more after my book club discussion. I thought that there were some great characters, but they weren't all developed to their full potential. I also thought some of the dialogue was unrealistic. It was as if it was a blend of 'old-timey' speak and a more modern dialogue. And many times I thought that there was no way that anyone would utter some of the sentences that they spoke. I was also disappointed that there seemed to be a big gap of where not much happened, and then many big events happened at one time, but happened towards the end of the novel so it wasn't developed well and just left the reader hanging.

What was most striking to me was the description of war, and what their boys faced. It felt very real and raw.

The scenes where Cora walks through the woods and finds the shells and sees the bunkers, and when Bobbie is trapped in the wire and when the group confronts the officer and hears the accounts of what their boys faced was very moving and very well done.

Overall, I'm glad I read it. Until this novel, I didn't realize that there is a Gold Star Mothers Club and it was interesting to read more about the organization.

Connie says

In 1929, Congress appropriated funds to give Gold Star Mothers the opportunity to visit the graves of their sons who died in World War I. The author, April Smith, was inspired by the real-life diary of Thomas Hammond who acted as an escort to a group of mothers traveling to France in 1931. The book follows fictional Cora Blake and four other East Coast mothers as they travel by ship to France, visiting Paris and Verdun.

There are lots of interesting historical details included in the book--the Depression, racial and ethnic prejudices, veterans with tin masks covering facial injuries, the battlefield, the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery, and the heartbreak of losing a son. I liked the book, but I did not feel especially emotionally connected to the characters. Since we are remembering the 100th Anniversary of World War I, it seemed very appropriate to read about the endless rows of graves of the fallen soldiers and the mothers who mourned them.

TL says

An interesting subject and lovely writing but it was boring for me. I may check out future books by the author but this one didn't do it for me unfortunately.

I received this via Goodreads First Reads in exchange for an honest review

Callie Glorioso-Mays says

A Star for Mrs. Blake is a historical fiction book set in 1931, thirteen years after the end of World War I. The story follows Cora Blake's journey from her small town in the United States to visit the grave of her son, Sammy, in Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery with a group of Gold Star Mothers (referring to the gold star that hung on their service flags after a family member had died).

Cora Blake, a volunteer librarian, lives on Deer Isle, Maine where she cares for her three nieces, and keeps tabs on her trouble-making brother-in-law. Living the midst of the Great Depression, Cora makes ends meet by working in the cannery and a frugal lifestyle. When a letter comes from the US government, Cora has a flashback to the letter she received 13 years ago telling her that her only son, who had lied about his age to enlist in the Army, had been killed in action. This letter, however, was an invitation to join other Gold Star Mothers to visit their sons final resting places in France, paid for by the United States.

With little hesitation, Cora decides she will join the pilgrimage. She travels to New York City where she

meets the group with whom she'll be traveling - four other Gold Star Mothers, a young nurse and a newly commissioned Army officer. The women are all unique, coming from different religions, ethnicities and socioeconomic levels, which adds drama to an already emotional journey. Once in France, Cora meets an American journalist, Griffin Reed, who was injured during the war and is now forced to wear a metal mask to cover his wounds. When Cora tells Griffin the story of her pilgrimage, including a secret she's kept for years, he writes an article about her that brings with it a surprise ending.

A Star for Mrs. Blake is based on the stories of deceased Army Colonel Thomas West Hammond, "whose first assignment as a graduate of West Point Academy was to accompany a party of Gold Star Mothers...on the pilgrimage to France." After I finished the book, I did some researching of my own and found that April Smith had done an excellent job of weaving historical fact within her fictional story. The characters quickly grew dear to my heart and I was moved to tears many times throughout the book. As I read about mothers crying over their sons graves, I found myself stopping the book for a moment to scoop my son into my arms and tell him about much I love him. This book gave me a greater appreciation for the sacrifice of our veterans and their families and a great appreciation for my own family.

Brittany says

I was up all night with the flu. This book was a non-challenging distraction.

More critical analysis would be less favorable. It had all the sophistication of a "Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants" book or an American Girl novel where you are allowed to use the word "screw." Well-researched, but fairly flat and predictable.

UPDATE: Turns out I did NOT have the flu. I was pregnant! And I'll probably always remember I was reading this darn book.

Lesya says

April Smith's novel, A Star for Mrs. Smith, is powerful and unforgettable. It's the perfect selection

for a book group, based on a little known fact of American history. She opens the book with a note from the National Archives. "In 1929, Congress enacted legislation that authorized the secretary of war to arrange for pilgrimages to the European cemeteries 'by mothers and widows of members of military and naval forces of the United States who died in the service at any time between April 5, 1917, and July 1, 1921, and whose remains are now interred in such cemeteries.'" According to this record, 6,693 women made the pilgrimage to Europe to visit their sons' graves. Smith takes readers on a pilgrimage with one group of women.

In 1931, Cora Blake is a librarian in a small island town off the coast of Maine, although the town hasn't had the money to pay her salary since the 1929 crash. She takes care of her brother-in-law and his three daughters. And, she's a Gold Star Mother. Thirteen years earlier, she lost her only son, Sammy. He lied about his age, and enlisted at sixteen. Although other sons of the island served, Cora was the only one whose son died in the war. The entire community pulled together to send Cora to New York City, where she would board a ship to travel to France and the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery where the young men who died at Verdun are buried.

As a librarian, Cora is an organizer, and she writes the letters to the small group of women she'll travel with. She's the unifying figure in a group that consists of a woman from a wealthy railroad family, a Jewish chicken farmer, an Irish servant, and a woman with mental health issues. But, Cora is so much more. She's the voice of conscience, the figure that doesn't understand segregation, and doesn't accept mothers sending sons off to war. When she meets expatriate journalist Griffin Reed, her life will change in ways she never expected.

A Star for Mrs. Blake is so rich that I can't really summarize the entire book. While Cora is the main figure, the other mothers represent the universality of mothers who lose their sons in war. April Smith manages to wrap so much into this book, from the difficulties of life in the Depression, the rigorous life on a Maine island, to the trip to Europe. She examines the differences in how the mothers of white and black soldiers were treated. Griffin Reed's disfigurement, although common at the time, is now forgotten as one result of that Great War. And, through the eyes of Cora, as well as those of a young lieutenant assigned as liaison officer to the group of Gold Star Mothers, we begin to see war differently.

April Smith's A Star for Mrs. Blake is a beautiful, sometimes heartbreaking novel. It's a compelling story of war and the people left behind. It's the story of Gold Star Mothers, the strong women who suffer unfathomable loss. It's a novel you won't easily forget.

April Smith's website is www.aprilsmith.net

Megan says

I was not terribly engrossed in this story. I think it had too many characters and too much happening to them. It almost felt like Smith had a check list of things that happened related to Gold Star Mothers and made sure to include the whole list. Segregation? Check. Immigrants? Check. Rich lady? Check. Poor lady? Check. Polio victim? Check. Jewish lady? Check. Crazy lady? Check. Health problems? Check. Motion sickness? Check. Issues with unexploded ordinance? Check. A veteran wearing one of those infamous metal masks? Check. And on and on....it just didn't always feel natural. Things felt included sometimes not to serve the plot so much as because they came up in Smith's research and she didn't want to leave anything out. However, I liked the character of Cora Blake, and the mothers and their keepers came across mostly as realistic and sympathetic. This book is an interesting way to explore some of the history and issues around World War I and its aftermath.

Kimberly says

What. A. Read.

When I signed up for the tour I was really interested in the book because I had never heard of the Gold Star Mothers. I'm a Canadian so I'm not well versed in American history but I found the idea of this government initiative to be what drove me to sign up since I rarely read historical fiction set after 1900 and I was very interested in reading a book based on a fictional woman, from small town America travelling overseas to finally see where her son rested 13 years after his death.

I loved Cora, especially how we were introduced to her. We got to know her, and what kind of life she led right from the beginning. For me I especially loved the fact that Cora was an average woman. She was

intelligent, and strong and so giving I was in awe of her strength to move on after the death of her son and her courage to confront his grave site so many years on. I'm not a mother yet, but I can't imagine burying my son or daughter overseas and being separated from them, but I respected her decision because of how much thought she gave it. Which was another thing that I enjoyed about Cora, she was a thinker and always weighed her options and she made me feel so much for her.

Since I don't read many novels set in this time period I thought it was a fantastic change of pace. I loved getting to know the world through Cora's eyes. I could tell how well researched the novel was and really appreciated that she chose to write the novel based on the perspective of a common woman rather than that of an upper class woman. I loved seeing Cora transform into a new woman whilst on her journey to see her son and the people she met along the way were every bit as interesting as she was, even if there were one or two I didn't care for as much.

In the end, I thought this was a though provoking read, I wonder about the real Gold Star Mothers, I wonder if they were relieved to see their fallen sons grave sites or only full of resolution that they had done the right thing in keeping them where they'd fallen. A Star for Mrs. Blake opened up a part of history that I had known nothing about before and made me remember all those brave men who died in the service for our nations and thankful to the mothers who lost their boys for the war effort. It was an emotional read, and definitely has me wanting to look into the time period more as well as leaving me wanting to read more by April Smith. Her writing is rich and descriptive and I loved her characters.

I would recommend A Star for Mrs. Blake to all those who enjoy historical fiction, and historical fiction set in the 1930's. It provides a brief glimpse into a past not so long ago but the differences in life between then and now are striking. This will make you think, and feel a wide range of emotions.

***I received a free copy of this book in exchange for my free and honest review. All thoughts and opinions expressed herein are 100% my own.**

Kressel Housman says

In 1929, Congress passed a law to cover an all-expense paid trip by boat for American mothers whose sons were killed in World War I and buried in France. This was during the Great Depression and Hoover's presidency, which is really quite amazing because he wasn't willing to let the surviving World War I veterans draw their pensions early. If the Gold Star mothers, as they were called, were treated the way this fictional account depicts, it must have been incredibly expensive, but then, the only people who made greater sacrifices than the Gold Star mothers were their fallen sons.

The historical event interested me, so I stuck with the book even though the writing was flawed in spots. The protagonist is a salt of the earth Maine librarian named Cora Blake, but the book jumps to other characters' perspectives at times, and the transitions weren't always smooth. The worst offense by far, though, came in the middle of the book when Cora meets A Man. There's almost an "invisible electric current between them," and he's "more alive than anyone she's ever known." Couldn't you just throw up? It sounds like something out of Darcy/Lizzy fanfic.

But in spite of that, the story and characters were compelling, including if not especially The Man. My favorite minor plot twist involved a bureaucratic mix-up that introduced us to an African American Gold Star mother and allowed us to see across the color line of segregation. There was also a Jewish character, but her

story didn't interest me as much.

All in all, I liked the book and I'm glad to have learned about this chapter in history. Perhaps someday I'll follow up with the real history.
