

Restless
By William Boyd

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *Restless*, a stylish spy novel from acclaimed author William Boyd.

About this book

“One day someone will come and kill me and then you'll be sorry” (1). Sally Gilmartin always warned her daughter, Ruth, that she would disappear someday. Now, in the summer of 1976, Sally is ready to reveal her secret to Ruth: Sally Gilmartin, suburban widow, is actually Eva Delectorskaya, a Russian-born spy for Great Britain. Eva fled the British Security Coordination in 1941, fearing for her life.

Eva was recruited into the British Secret Service in 1939, when her older brother, Kolia, was killed in the line of duty, spying on Fascists in Paris. A handsome Brit named Lucas Romer urged Eva to join his elite team within the British Security Coordination, to avenge her brother's murder. Eva Delectorskaya became Eve Dalton, British agent, and worked with Romer to manipulate news reports worldwide to alter the course of the spreading war. Eva fell in love with her boss, Romer, and took increasingly risky assignments from him in America, first seducing a White House official in Washington, then narrowly escaping death in the remote desert of New Mexico. Suspecting betrayal within the British spy network, Eva disappeared and changed her identity to Sally Gilmartin. But she never stopped looking over her shoulder.

Ruth, a language tutor and a mother herself, realizes that she never really knew her mother. In the politically turbulent climate of 1976, Ruth finds herself observing her international friends more closely. One of her language students, Hamid, an Iranian engineer, vies for Ruth's romantic attention, while her ex-boyfriend's brother, a German anarchist, camps out in Ruth's spare room. Ruth struggles to find the right balance between her radical past and her present-day responsibilities to her mother and her young son.

In *Restless*, author William Boyd asks, can 35 years of secrecy and betrayal finally come to an end?

For discussion

1. “The Story of Eva Delectorskaya” is parsed out slowly, chapter by chapter, both to Ruth and to the reader. What is the effect of this serial storytelling, full of cliffhangers and lingering questions, on Ruth? What is the effect on the reader?
2. Why does Eva take the job with the British government that Romer offers her? Does she have one reason, or possibly additional, unconscious motivations, as well?
3. Reading her mother's autobiography, Ruth realizes “how little we actually, really, know of our parents' biographies, how vague and undefined they are, like saints' lives almost – all legend and anecdote – unless we take the trouble to dig deeper” (33). Why hasn't Ruth dug deeper in her

mother's past, before 1976? Why don't more sons and daughters bother to investigate their parents' histories?

4. At the end of her wilderness exercise outside Lyne, Eva "felt she had changed in some small but profound way" (51). What brings about this transformation in Eva, and what effects of this change are visible in her personal and professional life?

5. The most important of Romer's rules is "Rule number one... Don't trust anyone" (56). Eva wonders, "was this the spy's particular, unique fate – to live in a world without trust?" (57) How does Eva comply with Romer's rule, and when does she break it? Does Eva completely trust anyone, even after she reveals her autobiography?

6. Ruth realizes that her mother was "virtually the same age" (89) as she is, when Eva witnessed the murder of the Dutch agent, Lt. Joos, near the German border. How are Ruth and Eva's lives different at the same age, in 1939 and 1976? How are they similar?

7. Review Eva's confrontation with Deputy Inspector Luis de Baca in the desert. How does Eva's training help her get the best of de Baca?

8. Ruth teaches English using a textbook called *Life with the Ambersons*. The fictional family's instructive experiences take a dark turn when their dog runs away: "The fear of poisoning entered the cloistered world of Darlington Crescent" (181). How do the Ambersons' adventures in the textbook parallel the Gilmartins' experiences in *Restless*?

9. What motivates Sally to share her history with Ruth in 1976? Are her reasons selfish, or considerate of her daughter and grandson?

10. What are some early clues of Romer's duplicity? What false leads does Boyd provide to prolong the mystery of Eva's betrayal?

11. Hamid tells Ruth, "My brother was killed by SAVAK" (281), Iran's intelligence agency. What does Hamid have in common with Eva Delectorskaya? How might this connection draw Ruth closer to Hamid? Might Ruth and Hamid have a future together?

12. The objective of the British Security Coordination (BSC) in New York was "to bring America into the war, to cajole and nudge, persuade and convince" (148). In light of the unexpected Pearl Harbor attack, did the BSC ultimately succeed or fail in its mission?

13. When Eva first meets the man she will marry, "she felt the past fall from her like loosened shackles. She stepped closer to Sean Gilmartin... and she lifted her face to his quietly knowing, quietly smiling eyes. Something told her that the story of Eva Delectorskaya had come to its natural end" (293). Do the circumstances of Eva and Sean's meeting lessen the romance of their marriage? Why or why not?

14. Why does Sally dislike Timothy “Rodrigo” Thoms’s historical reading of *The Story of Eva Delectorskaya*? Does Thoms’s interpretation render Eva’s spy work “insignificant and petty” (321), as Sally says ruefully?

15. *The Times Literary Supplement* (UK) praises *Restless* as an “utterly absorbing page-turner. British fiction contains a rich tradition of literary thrillers, from Wilkie Collins through Graham Greene to John Le Carré, and William Boyd’s new novel, *Restless*, sits firmly within it.” In what sense does *Restless* follow this British tradition of literary thrillers, and how might it exceed that description? Into which genres does this novel fit?

16. As William Boyd explains in his article “The Secret Persuaders” (<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,,1854211,00.html>), the Nazi map of South America, which implied that Hitler had designs on the Americas, actually existed and was deplored by President Roosevelt. As we see in *Restless*, Boyd believes that the map was forged by the British Security Coordination (BSC). If so, what are the moral implications of the BSC forgery? Does the goal of defeating the Nazis justify the BSC’s methods? Why or why not?

17. How does the title *Restless* reflect the themes and mood of the novel?

Suggested reading

William Boyd, *Any Human Heart*; Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam*; Irene Némirovsky, *Suite Française*; John le Carré, *The Mission Song*; Alan Furst, *The Polish Officer*; Joseph Kanon, *The Good German*; Martin Amis, *House of Meetings*; Sebastian Faulks, *Charlotte Gray*; Robert Harris, *Fatherland*; Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient*; Graham Greene, *The Quiet American*; Ward Just, *Forgetfulness*.

William Boyd is the author of eight novels, three collections of short stories, and twelve screenplays that have been filmed. He has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the Whitbread Award for Best First Novel, the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for Fiction. He lives in London and Southwest France.