

# The New York Times

PROFILE

## A Novelist Inspired by the Cold War, a C.I.A. Typing Pool and 'Dr. Zhivago'

Lara Prescott — fascinated by the way Boris Pasternak's novel was used as a propaganda tool — conjured a world of secretaries, spies and mint-green typewriters in her debut, "The Secrets We Kept."

By Karen Valby  
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AUSTIN, Tex. — In 2018, two weeks before Lara Prescott's agents sent publishers the manuscript of her first novel — about the C.I.A. plot to influence Cold War Russia with the banned love story "Doctor Zhivago" — a famous male writer warned her, "You're not going to get anything for this. You need to edit it like Hemingway. We can talk about it over beers."

"The Secrets We Kept," a gorgeous and romantic feast of a novel anchored by a cast of indelible secretaries — some groomed to be secret agents, and all clacking away at covert C.I.A. documents on mint-green typewriters — promptly sold to Knopf at auction for \$2 million.

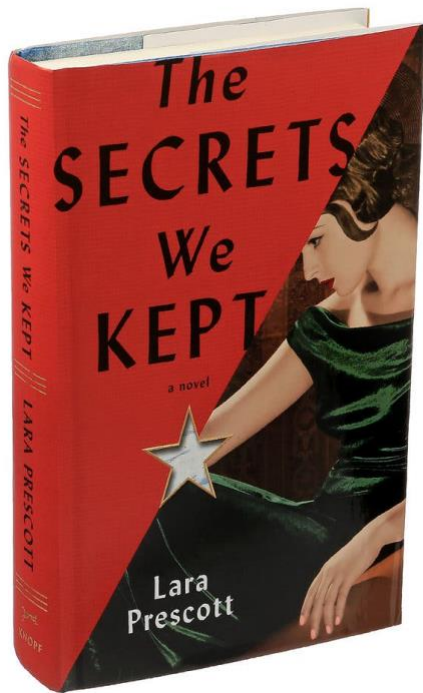
"I'd say that was the most man-splainy thing that's happened to me in the writing world!" says Prescott, 37, with a laugh over coffee at the Austin cafe where she finished her first draft in 2016.



Such a display of masculine bombast reminded her of her former career in politics, where she worked as a consultant on K Street for progressive Democratic campaigns. Her experience in a world fueled by propaganda and lorded over by big personalities — “What would make a 60-year-old man think it O.K. to ask a young woman why I didn’t wear heels more?” — informed her book.

[ *“The Secrets We Kept” is one of our most anticipated September titles.* ]

The years of embedding in campaigns, writing candidates’ social media and stump speeches, left Prescott drained and disillusioned. She’d forever wanted to write fiction, dating back to a child when she submitted a 10-page story to Highlights magazine, the pediatrician-office staple. (“My first literary rejection!”) You could say she was born to write this historical novel: Prescott’s mother named her after the doomed heroine from her favorite movie, the 1965 adaptation of Boris Pasternak’s epic.



Prescott was turned down the first year she applied to graduate schools. “I just thought, I don’t have it,” she says. But the following year she was accepted at the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas. There, early in her tenure, the fellows were treated to a day of mini-pitch sessions with literary agents. After reading a short-story version of what Prescott would eventually expand into her novel, a high-profile agent warned her, “No one is interested in Russia anymore.” Prescott left the room flattened, wondering, “Do I keep going?”

She dug in for four private drafts, done with sharing work until she was sure of its sturdiness. In early 2017, she finally presented the novel to her Michener thesis adviser, the author [Elizabeth McCracken](#), who remembers thinking, “Oh my God, this book is going to do amazing things in the world.”

A year of revisions later, Prescott’s agent, Jeff Kleinman at Folio, sent the manuscript out to publishers packaged with advance praise from McCracken, Bret Anthony Johnston and Ben Fountain. Kleinman asked Prescott what would be a satisfying deal. She told him \$100,000, figuring that would give her three years to write full-time at the roughly \$27,000 a year she’d been granted while at Michener. By the end of the week she’d spoken with 20 editors, her novel had gone to auction and she went with Knopf, which wasn’t even the highest bidder. She walked away from a two-book option, unwilling to work in the future with a gun to her head.

A deal that sweet can set a young writer up to fail. The money and expectations, the paranoia of peer envy or eye rolling. “I’ve had students that I thought were great writers before where I would go, ‘Is this success going to destroy this person’s life?’” says McCracken. “I’m not worried about Lara.”

She praises Prescott’s work ethic and devotion to the craft. “But also, frankly, I think she’s going to earn out her advance. She’s not going to be somebody who sold her book for a ton of money and then is going to be a commercial failure and wreck the rest of her career.” Rights to the novel have sold in 30 countries, and it was optioned in a major movie sale by Marc Platt Productions and The Ink Factory.

Prescott has the slightly worried personality of a woman who went to 12 years of Catholic school and was raised by Pennsylvania parents who cautioned against taking oneself too seriously. She's game to indulge in casting ideas with a reporter — what about Saoirse Ronan for the unlikely spy Irina or Michelle Williams for Pasternak's long-suffering muse, [Olga](#) — without sounding invested in Hollywood machinations. She pokes fun at her self-serious expression in her author photo, explaining that when she fake-smiles for pictures she looks insane. She tears up a few times, like when she describes calling her parents with news of the Knopf deal. "I had this great career in politics and then I took this huge pay cut to go back to school," she says. "And my poor dad said, 'I'm just happy you're going to be O.K.'"

With the sale of the book, Prescott seems to have built sensibly upon an already cheerful life. She and her husband Matt — who works for the Humane Society of the United States and recently published his own book, "Food Is the Solution" — bought their first home, a three-bedroom midcentury ranch with a pink and turquoise tiled bathroom and a writing shed in the backyard. They have two cats and a rescue puppy named Mo, and their close friends live down the block with a new baby they like to snuggle. Prescott is in a book club (they last discussed Toni Morrison's "Sula"). There is comfort in living far from the publishing industry.

"I'm not going out to cocktail parties every night," she says of her somewhat anonymous Texas existence. "There's no sense of competition."

Prescott is eager to pick the right rabbit hole to fall into for her next project. She's already started researching the Federal Writers' Project, the Depression-era program that paid literary greats like Zora Neale Hurston and John Cheever to go out looking for American tales. She's fascinated by the world of fake news — who writes it, and why and how it spreads. She'd love to chronicle her dream candidate Elizabeth Warren on the campaign trail if she were to get the nomination.

There's also the reality that she's now being sent advance copies of books hopeful for a blurb from a famous writer. Her! It'd be easy to let this flush of a time go to one's head. But there's a difference between ego and self-possession. When asked what she's proudest of in all this, Prescott says, "I wrote a book that I would love to read. And that my sister and mom would want to read. What more can you do?"