One of the most chronicled, dissected, discussed, and disputed characters in the popular press of the last century was a young woman fished out of Berlin’s Landwehr Canal in 1920 in a failed suicide attempt. She was thereafter confined in an insane asylum as ‘Fraulein Unbekannt’ where a fellow inmate declared that she recognized her from a newspaper photo as the Grand Duchess Tatiana, daughter of Tsar Nicholas, who, with his entire family, had been assassinated in ‘The House of Special Purpose’ by the Bolsheviks, fearing they would be restored to the throne should the Revolution be defeated. The identification animated the depressive Fraulein, who admitted she was not really Tatiana, but Anastasia, the youngest of the Romanov daughters. Thus began an endless and fruitless attempt to authenticate her claim, made all the more poignant by the utter impossibility of disposing of it one way or the other. So contentious is her identification that true believers still refuse to accept the DNA evidence (unavailable during Anderson’s life) that pretty comprehensively put paid to any genetic connection between Anna and the Romanov line.

Only a daring novelist would hope to add anything new to this well-tilled ground, but Ariana Franklin has managed to breathe new life into the tale by placing the claimant in the care and protection of Esther Solomonova, a badly scarred young survivor of a pogrom. Esther is herself an employee of ‘Prince’ Nick, another Russian ‘royal’, who hopes to turn any number of dishonest Deutschmarks by establishing Anna as the true heir to the presumed Romanov fortune. What ought to have been a simple and sleazy scam turns sinister when it becomes clear that Anna is being stalked by a mysterious person who appears in Berlin on a regular schedule and who may well be disposing of those close to Anna by torturing them in horrific ways so they will reveal her whereabouts. Anna believes he is a Bolshevik agent; others doubt his existence altogether, but
certainly rather a large number of people are turning up dead in Anna’s vicinity. Franklin successfully evokes the atmosphere of Fritz Lang’s Berlin (Peter Lorre even makes a cameo appearance) to add to the tension.

But even a serial killer counts for relatively little compared to the mass murderer who is about to come to power in Germany. The climax of the novel takes place as the Weimar Republic crumbles and the Nazis take over with terrifying efficiency. Curiously, it is here that the novel really falters and not merely because the importance of the serial killer plot is overwhelmed by the far greater horrors unfolding in Berlin. Franklin is unable to make the reader really care about the capture of a single killer in a world of murderers who have taken over the police and are running the state.

Though this is the first novel she has published under this name, Franklin is evidently an historical novelist of some experience. There is a commercial slickness about the book, especially in the final twist, and a superficiality in its research that prevents it from being much more than an effective entertainment. It certainly lacks the imaginative inventiveness of Robert Harris’s FATHERLAND or the thoughtful re-examination of a complex political period that we have in CJ Sansom’s more recent WINTER IN MADRID. But it is decidedly entertaining and in spots we can see glimmers of what it might have been had the author taken herself and her subject just a bit more seriously.
Ariana Franklin was born in London just before World War II. During the war, she and her parents lived with her father's uncle, a minister in Winston Churchill's wartime cabinet. In London, Ariana had a privileged life, with a nanny, a maid and a chauffeur. But eventually her mother got tired of the constant air raids, so they went to live with Ariana's maternal grandparents in the seaside town of Torquay in Devonshire, leaving her father behind—permanently, as it turned out.

After her parent's divorce, Ariana and her mother had very little money and lived in a tiny apartment over a shop. It was very different from their days in London, but in retrospect, Ariana was glad to have seen both sides of life.

To earn money, she left school at fifteen. Ariana had a great love of journalism—perhaps the only thing inherited from her father, a correspondent for the Times—so she looked for work in that field. By the age of seventeen she was back in London, working on a local paper in its East End, where she was spotted by a national newspaper. At twenty, she became the youngest reporter then in Fleet Street. Sadly, on her 21st birthday, Ariana was covering a murder on the South coast and missed her party entirely. "But, it's my birthday," she protested to her news editor when he told her to cover the murder. "Many happy returns," he said, "and now get down to Southampton."

Ariana found that she loved a reporter's life: accompanying the Queen on a visit to Paris, invading Wales, dressed for combat, her face blacked, on an exercise with Royal Marine Commandos under fire from live ammunition.

Marriage to a fellow journalist, Barry Norman, and Fleet Street didn't mix—he was always flying into the country as she flew out of it. So, not wanting another divorce in the family, Ariana gave up her newspaper career and instead...
settled down in the country, giving birth to two daughters within fourteen months of each other.

With a child on either hip, she continued to write. Anything. Magazine articles, biographies, ghost stories. Most of all, history, especially women's history. How did we get here? Why didn't we get here sooner?

She became a specialist on the early Middle Ages, its justice, its climate, dress, food, habits, and crime. In fact, her first book, which dealt with the coming of the Common Law and the jury system under that great English kings, Henry II, received plaudits from university professors of history and won a BBC award for its accuracy and depiction of the twelfth century. Accuracy is important, Ariana believes. If a reader's paying you the compliment of buying your book, you've got to get it right.

So there she was, happily writing historical novels to good reviews and charting women's fight for equality through the ages. She had just dealt with the French Revolution and was wondering what the hell to do next when literary agent Helen Heller came into her life with an irresistible offer, "Why not write an historical thriller?"

Now, if Ariana's a sucker for anything, it's for Raymond Chandler's dictum: "When in doubt, have a man come in with a gun." But this time, the man with a gun needed to be a woman. So it was back to the twelfth century for Ariana—no guns, but lots of crossbows, and poison and daggers, and, believe it or not, a school of medicine in Salerno where women could train as doctors and where autopsy was permitted.

Thus Adelia, the 12th century female pathologist, was born to take up her role as "Mistress of the Art of Death" fighting medieval crime and speaking for victims who otherwise would have been forgotten. Sounds exciting? It is. It's a thriller. It's also, because Ariana Franklin's writing it, accurate, fascinating. And don't forget fun...
Discussion Questions

1. The entire book is told from the perspective of Esther and Inspector Schmidt. How do you think the story would have differed (if at all) if any of the other characters' perspectives had been used? Did you find Esther and Schmidt to be reliable, accurate narrators, especially as observers of the changing Germany around them?

2. The idea that people simply "want to believe" that the Grand Duchess Anastasia survived the execution of her family provides much of Prince Nick's justification for his scheme with Anna. Did you see this hope, this desire to believe in something so implausible, as a human virtue or a weakness? How does it compare with the rising public support for the National Socialist movement within the community at large?

3. Compare the supposedly deviant characters that populate Prince Nick's decadent Berlin to the fascist youths in the relatively "clean" SA movement growing in Germany. How does the author depict these two groups and what qualities seem to qualify as "moral" in this turbulent era? In what ways were these two groups similar to each other?

4. Consider the issue of post-war identity in this novel, both on a personal and national level. How does identity (and how it could be completely reshaped and reinvented in this era) influence, both for bad and for good, the actions of the individual characters in the book?

5. In the prologue of the book, we get a very brief glimpse of Anna and R.G.'s chance meeting at the Landwehr Canal. The devastating meeting of past and present in that one moment sets off the calamitous events that make up the rest of the book. What other examples of past-meeting-present occur throughout the book and what consequences result from these encounters?

6. What was your impression of Prince Nick? Did he strike you as a sympathetic character or a victimizer who simply exploited the poor and desperate? Did you think he actually believed that Anna was, in fact, Anastasia?

7. Why do you think Schmidt was so devoted to capturing the mysterious R.G. alive, even though he is aware of the greater threats rising around him? Do you think he should have taken more care to ensure his and Esther's safety?