

BOOK CLUB KIT

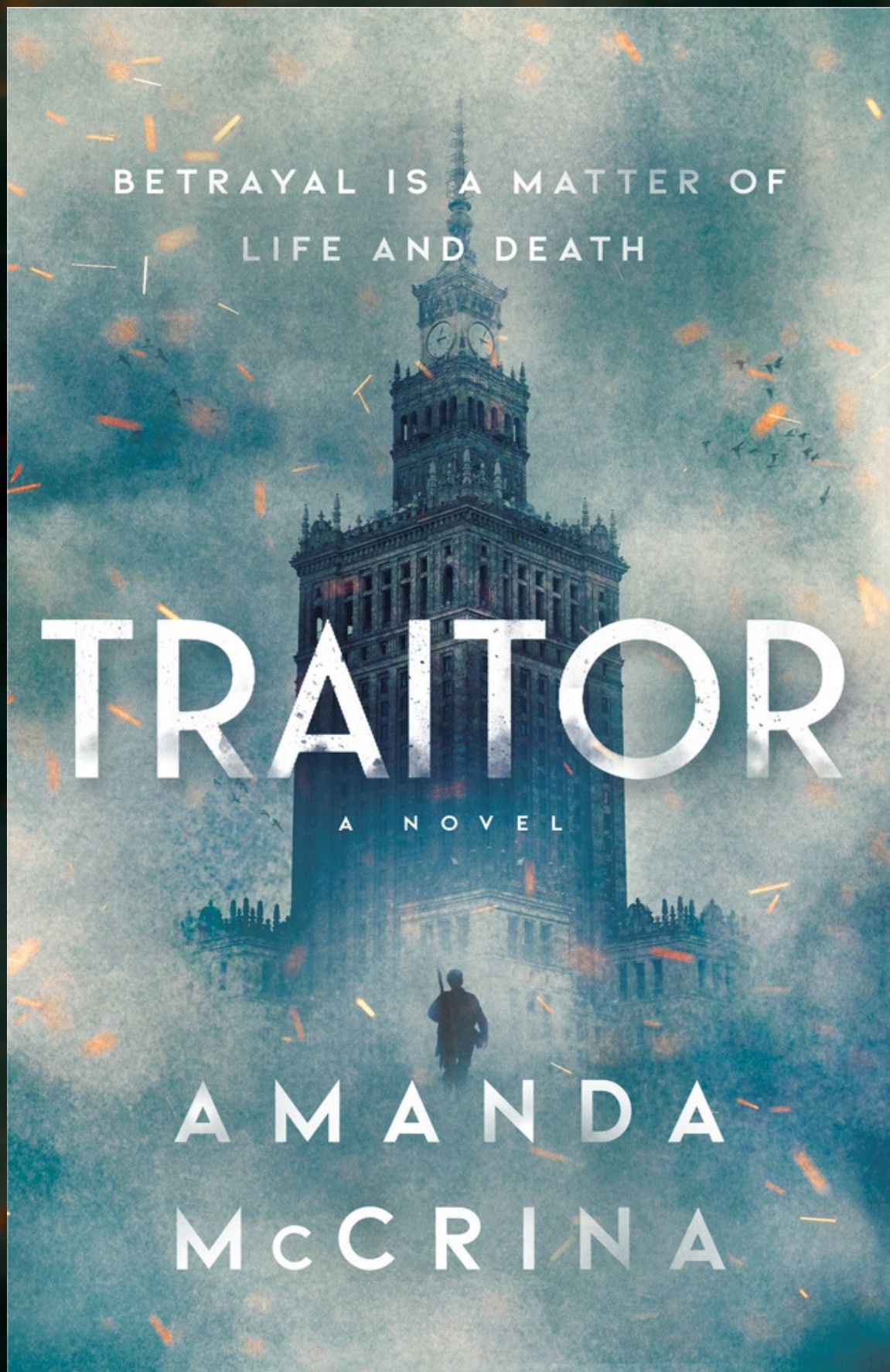
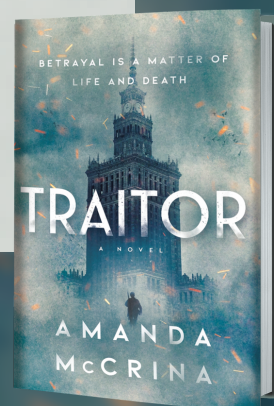


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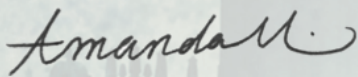
DEAR READER,

This story has been kicking around in my head in some form since high school. In its very earliest iteration, *Traitor* was a short story I wrote for a history class project. (I was homeschooled; my mom is the one who gave me the assignment and insisted for years that I turn my short story into a novel, which is why *Traitor* is dedicated to her.) It's the first serious piece of fiction I ever wrote, which is one reason it feels very personal to me. The other reason is that it's a very much a product of my own Polish heritage.

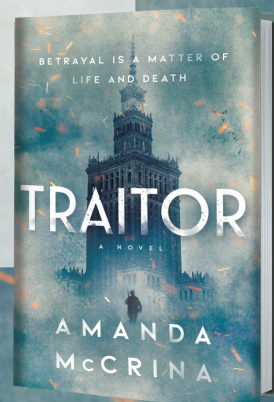
World War II is a popular and well-trodden topic, but there are still neglected corners, and the eastern front, including the Polish experience, tends to be one of those. Part of that is because so much of that history was lost in sealed Soviet archives and is only recently coming back into public knowledge. And part of it is because it's such a controversial, fraught history—one that continues to drive heated debates about the war and shape geopolitics all across the former Soviet bloc.

While *Traitor* takes place against a backdrop of complex history and politics, it's always been first and foremost a character-driven story. I don't think you're supposed to pick favorites, even of fictional children, but if I did, Tolya and Aleksey would be mine. I hope you love them as much as I do.

Thank you for reading,



AMANDA McCRINA



Content Warnings

**Below are content warnings for *Traitor* from author
Amanda McCrina:**

Graphic wartime violence

On-the-page depictions of suicide (Chapter 20)

Torture (Chapters 21-23)

Anti-Polonism

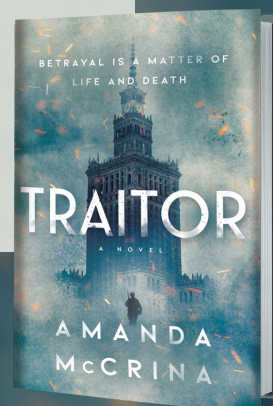
Anti-Ukrainianism

Anti-Semitism

Brief references to child abuse

Alcohol and drug use

Strong language



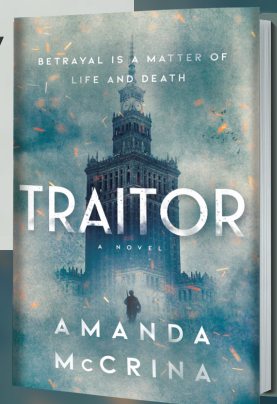
Author Interview

***Traitor* began as a short story and evolved from there. What was the original inspiration and how did the idea change?**

I wrote the original draft of what would become *Traitor* for a history assignment in my senior year of high school. We were studying 20th-century world history, and the assignment was to choose any of the areas we'd studied and write a short story in that setting. I think we'd just finished reading Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, and I'd also recently read Alan Furst's *Night Soldiers*, so the Soviet experience was on my mind. I decided I wanted to write a war story from the Soviet perspective. I started writing about a young Soviet sniper orphaned in the Holodomor (the engineered famine in 1930s Soviet Ukraine) and coming to terms with his identity and role in the Soviet war effort. The plot looked pretty different at that point—much more of a conventional chase thriller with the protagonist trying to outrun the Soviet secret police. But the core of the story and the sniper character stuck throughout.

What are you working on now?

A companion novel to *Traitor*—I hesitate to say sequel, but there are overlapping characters—is scheduled for next fall. My current project, just started, is a 1950s Cold War story set in upstate New York.



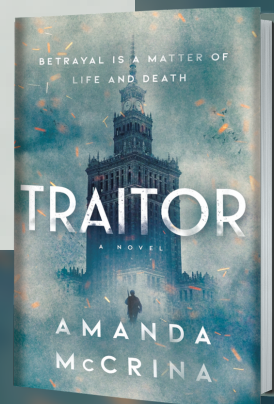
Author Interview

What was your research process like? Are any of the characters based on real people?

I put that high school short story away for almost ten years, then came back to it in grad school. At that point, I had access to a university library and a little more know-how about finding good online resources—maps, photo archives, other primary sources. I had enough foundational knowledge to pound out a (very) rough draft; then, with a draft in hand, I knew which areas I needed to dig into more deeply. I spent a lot of time reading, honing successive drafts as I went through more and more sources. I asked a few sensitivity readers to take a look at the manuscript for things like religious and cultural depictions. Later in the process, I moved to Europe for a few years, so I got the opportunity to broaden my research through museums and travel.

Are any of the characters based on real people?

I knew pretty early on that I wanted to stay away from using real people as characters outright, but I did build around them in some cases. My female sniper, Nataliya, owes a lot to Roza Shanina. And I borrowed a bit from Nikita Khrushchev—then a Communist Party boss in Ukraine—and his brutal campaign against the Ukrainian Insurgent Army to create my NKVD colonel, Volkov. There are a few actual historical figures in *Traitor*, but mostly on the fringes or mentioned in passing.



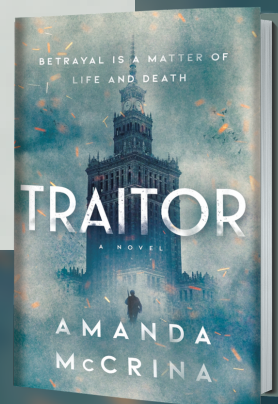
Author Interview

The events in *Traitor* aren't as well known to U.S readers. Can you tell us more about your desire to write about those parts of history?

Thankfully, I think there's been a growth of interest in the Eastern Front since I was writing proto-*Traitor* in high school. I don't think I can overstate how much Ruta Sepetys has done to raise awareness about the Eastern Front in a new generation of readers. Still, there are neglected corners of this history and plenty of stories that haven't been told, for several different reasons—one of which being that Eastern-Front history is frustratingly complex and there often aren't any clear-cut "good guys," which makes it tricky to write a compelling story. But I think that makes it even more important to recover the stories of goodness and kindness that are there underneath all the bleakness. And I'm especially excited to be able to write about the Polish experience, as I come from a Polish background myself. The Polish resistance movement was the largest in Europe and—in my opinion!—deserves more attention than it's gotten.

You're an artist as well. Have you done any sketches of the characters in the book?

I tend not to sketch my own characters. I usually have a pretty firm idea in my head of what each character looks like, but I don't trust my drawing skills to be able to express them very well, and I'm afraid of destroying my mental images if I try too hard to reproduce them on paper.



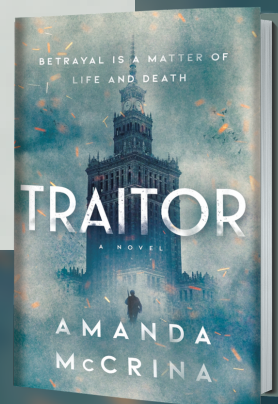
Author Interview

This novel is complex both in the dual timelines and points of view, but also in the fact that characters are so uncertain of others' loyalties and motivations. What were the challenges of writing a novel where no one can be trusted?

Purely from a storytelling standpoint, I think it's easier to write a story about people you can't trust than about people you can! It definitely creates a lot of opportunity for conflict, which is what drives any story. The trick is finding the balance. I want readers on the edge of their seats, wondering how on earth the characters are going to escape this time. I don't want to keep hitting readers over the head with overwhelming hopelessness and the ugliness of human nature. I want them to be able to find moments of grace, hope, and even humor throughout.

You get into the minds of two different characters in this book. Which was your favorite to write and why?

This is like choosing a favorite child. I loved writing Aleksey. His narrative voice—90% snark and self-deprecation—came very easily to me. I actually had to do very little revising with his chapters. Tolya was more difficult because he's a more shuttered, emotionally closed-off character. But this has always been first and foremost Tolya's story.

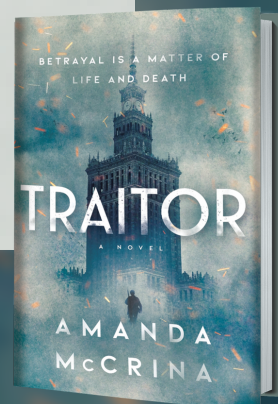


Author Interview

The book is split between Tolya's chapters in 1944 and Aleksey's chapters in 1941. Aleksey appears in both, which means at a certain point the reader knows his ultimate fate and the losses he'll suffer. How did that impact the way you wrote his character?

Aleksey didn't actually get his own POV until several drafts in. The story was originally only from Tolya's perspective. But slowly I began to realize that I needed to give the reader more. As the author, I knew Aleksey's background, but I was worried that unless the reader knew the things I knew, they wouldn't understand his motivations or even find him to be a sympathetic character. The difficulty of weaving his story in with Tolya's was that certain tensions have automatically been removed. Whatever happens to him in 1941, we obviously know he survives, because he shows up in 1944. So it's more a question of how does this character, as we meet him in 1941, become this quite different character we meet in 1944?

In full disclosure—until quite late in edits, I tried very deliberately to keep the reader from knowing that Aleksey in 1941 and Solovey in 1944 were the same person; originally there was a big “ah-ha!” moment pretty late in the narrative where the reader realized they were the same. So through most of the writing process, Tolya's chapters didn't “spoil” Aleksey's in quite the same way. But we eventually decided to reveal the Aleksey/Solovey connection much earlier to keep an already complicated book from being even more confusing.



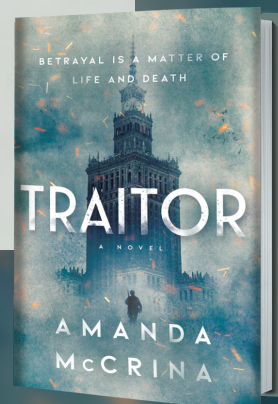
Author Interview

If readers are interested in learning more about this moment in history, where would you recommend that they start?

I always recommend Timothy Snyder, who's probably the best-known popular historian of 20th-century Eastern Europe. *Bloodlands* is an intense and frankly devastating read, but it's the best and clearest overview of the Eastern Front that I've found. While *Bloodlands* doesn't focus exclusively on Poland and Ukraine, Snyder spends a good deal of time explaining the broad historical context for the central conflicts in *Traitor*.

What do you hope readers take away from the ending?

The trite answer is "whatever they want." I never like trying to pin down meanings, and I'm afraid I tend to write very open endings. But I hope readers will finish *Traitor* realizing there's often so much more to people—so many more complexities to their actions, motives, and struggles—than we might at first assume. If there's anything to be taken away from *Traitor*, I hope it's empathy.



Discussion Guide

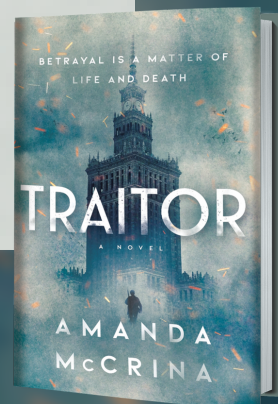
1) Why do you think the author chose to divide the book between two different time periods and perspectives? Which POV was your favorite and why? Is there another character in the novel whose perspective you would've liked to read?

2) How did Aleksey's sections impact the way you read his character in Tolya's sections?

3) At one point, a character thinks another is "at war with himself"—do you believe that sentiment is true for most of the characters in the book? Why or why not?

4) Characters disguise their motives to protect themselves, even making the reader unsure of who to trust. How did this impact your reading experience?

5) Many of the characters in the novel are working under threat of violence, with their only true loyalty to themselves. With this in mind, what do you think about the book's title? Who, if anyone, in the novel is a traitor?



Discussion Guide

6) How did you feel about the ending? Why do you think the author chose to end the story there, and what do you imagine happened next?

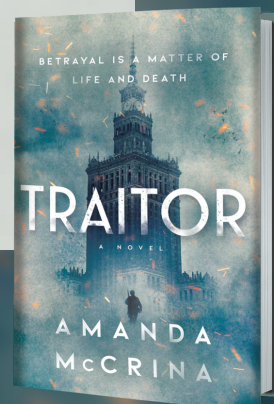
7) What was your reaction to the reappearance of Nataliya Koval? Do you believe she'd follow through on her threat if she did find Tolya again?

8) Were you familiar with this moment in history before reading *Traitor*? If not, why do you think it isn't more widely known?

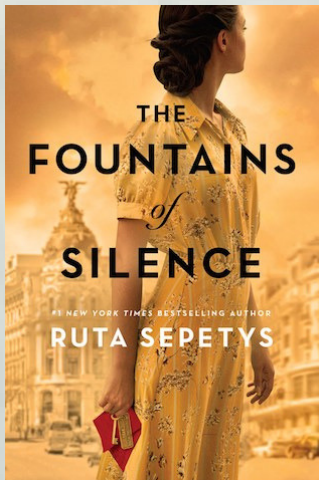
Here are two questions suggested by the author:

9) Tolya agonizes over having fought for the Red Army even though the Soviet regime murdered his parents. Was his "collaboration" justifiable? (Would it have been justifiable for him to join the German army?)

10) A morally crucial moment for Tolya is when he refuses to kill a wounded NKVD soldier. Why did he refuse? Should he have refused?

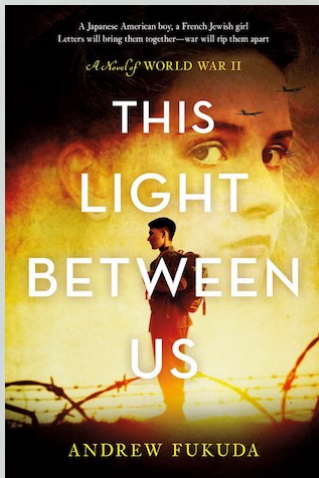


What to Read Next



***The Fountains of Silence* by Ruta Sepetys**

Ruta Sepetys is well-known to YA readers for her richly detailed works of historical fiction. Set in 1957, *The Fountains of Silence* transports readers to Madrid at a time when Spain was controlled by the fascist dictator General Francisco Franco. Eighteen-year-old Daniel Matheson arrives in Spain with his trusty camera in hand, preparing to capture the beauty of his mother's home country on film. But the pictures he takes reveal a darker side of Spain, one locals warn him to stay far away from.



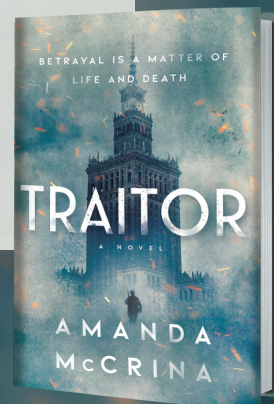
***This Light Between Us* by Andrew Fukuda**

In this YA novel, a Japanese American boy and a French Jewish girl begin exchanging letters in 1935. At first Alex Maki isn't thrilled about having Charlie Levy as a penpal. But as they exchange letters and grow closer, the two begin relying on each other as they weather through the Nazi occupation of France and the Japanese American internment camps in the wake of Pearl Harbor.



***White Rose* by Kip Wilson**

If your book club is looking for historical fiction based on true stories, check out this verse novel, which is inspired by Sophie Scholl. German college student Sophie teamed up with her brother and his fellow soldiers to form a non-violent resistance group that fought back against the propaganda used by the Nazi army.

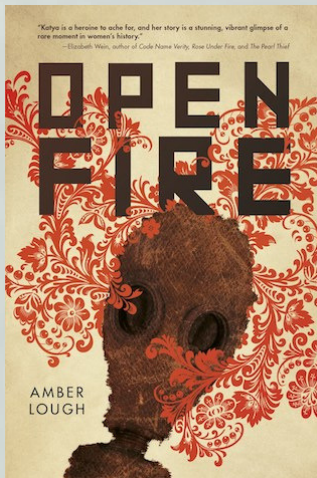


What to Read Next



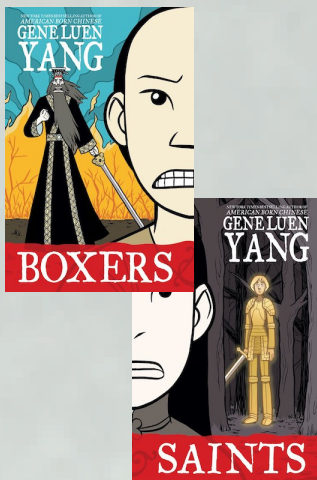
***Flygirl* by Sherri L. Smith**

Ida Mae Jones longs to fly, and when America goes to war with Germany and Japan, she has her chance. The Women Airforce Service Pilots is her ticket to the skies, but they won't accept Black women as pilots. Ida Mae is forced to make a choice between losing her one shot to achieve her dream or hiding who she is. She makes the tough choice to pass as white to enter the program. Smith's YA novel explores racism, sexism, and one girl's journey to taking off.



***Open Fire* by Amber Lough**

This YA novel takes readers to Russia in 1917 where 17-year-old Katya is working in a munitions factory to help her country win the war against Germany. When she learns that an all-female battalion is forming, she drops everything to enlist, even as it means confronting the horrifying realities of war.



***Boxers & Saints* duology by Gene Luen Yang**

This graphic novel duology follows two children from the same village on the different paths their lives take—exploring the divisions within China in the late 1800s. If your book club was fascinated by *Traitor*'s exploration of the different motivations from characters of similar backgrounds and the reasons why they did or didn't join specific causes, you will find a lot to discuss in *Boxers* and *Saints*.



Further Reading

If you're looking to read nonfiction about this moment in history, here are resources that Amanda McCrina recommends (roughly in order from less academic to more academic).

Bloodlands by Timothy Snyder

Red Famine by Anne Applebaum

A Writer at War by Vasily Grossman

Ivan's War by Catherine Merridale

The Eagle Unbowed by Halik Kochanski

Thousands of Roads by Maria Savchyn Pyskir

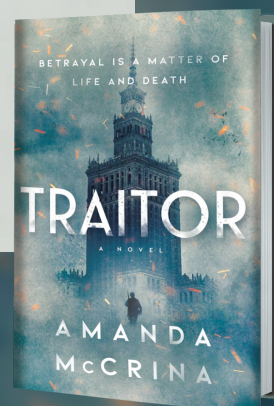
The Ukrainian Righteous compiled by the Polish Institute of National Remembrance

(available as a downloadable PDF: volhyniamassacre.eu)

Courage and Fear by Ola Hnatiuk

The Paradox of Ukrainian Lviv by Tarik Cyril Amar

Stepan Bandera by Grzegorz Rossoliński-Liebe



Bookmarks



"We've all got our
own little wars."



About the Author

Amanda McCrina

Amanda McCrina was homeschooled through high school and graduated from the University of West Georgia with a BA in history and political science. For three years, she taught high school English and government at an international school in Madrid, Spain, and is now a bookseller in Franklin, Tennessee. She is the author of *Traitor* and the Blood Oath duology.

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Amanda Mae Steele Photography

