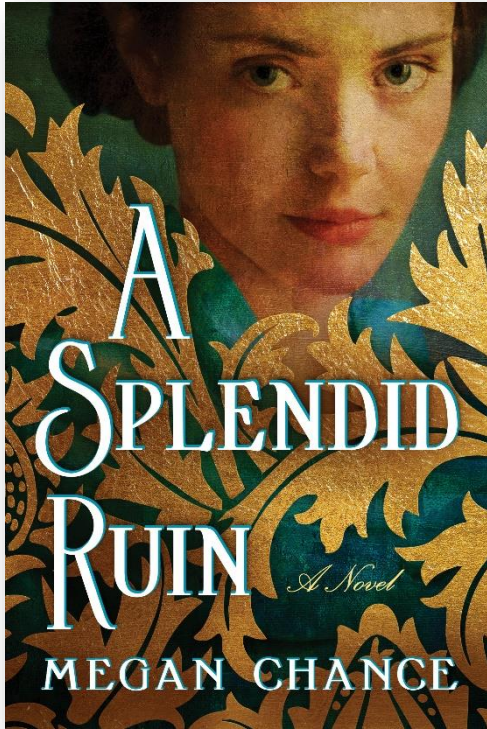


A Splendid Ruin Readers' Guide



- 1) How does the Sullivan house itself seem to mirror May's predicament?
- 2) One of the mysteries in the book is what happened between Florence and Charlotte Kimble. As May gets to know her aunt, the disparities in the way Florence and Charlotte tell the same stories confuse her—what does this tell you about the relationship between the sisters? Which of them do you believe? Why? Do you believe there is absolute truth on either side?
 - 3) *"I saw Aunt Florence where I'd never seen my mother, and it was not for lack of trying ... I saw what I had never seen before—a family resemblance. How funny, to find a part of myself three thousand miles from where I'd started."* How do you think this observation impacts how May thinks about her aunt and her new life with the Sullivans?
- 4) *"San Francisco doesn't hold your mistakes against you. There are always opportunities. Always. You just have to take advantage of them when you see them. I do hope you understand ... There are many opportunities in a life. It's not a failing to take whatever comes one's way. In fact, I rather think it a strength."* What do you think is Jonny's purpose in telling May these things?
- 5) Goldie is solicitous with her mother and also dismissive and impatient and sometimes even mean. She is also angry over her father's mistress. Florence, for her part, makes some remarks about Goldie that May perceives as accusatory. What do you think of Goldie and Florence's mother/daughter relationship?
- 6) May feels the social life she has entered into is a kind of prison. Why do you think she feels this? She has everything she's always wanted and dreamed about ... *And I longed for something more with an intensity that surprised me.* What do you think she's longing for? Do you understand how she feels? Have there been times in your life when you've felt the same?
- 7) At Blessington, May says: *the attitudes of the nurses originated from a more base instinct. In their eyes, we'd lost our humanity along with our minds. Those of us who*

could not be cajoled, corralled, or otherwise controlled were seen as animals. Whatever compassion the nurses once had was stripped away by the sheer relentlessness of our insanity. What do you think about this observation? Do you think it still true today in how we perceive madness? Why or why not?

- 8) When May finally finds herself in possession of a sketchbook and pencils again at Blessington, she realizes: *I had found a way to be here. I had found a way to survive, and that was the first step to acceptance.* She decides to give up her drawing. Do you understand why May chooses to reject her drawing at this time? What do you think of that decision? Have there been times in your life when you've sacrificed something you loved for a similar reason? Have you ever felt you belonged in a place you did not want to belong?
- 9) *Someone began to sing an aria, sad and mournful, an elegy, and people all around quieted to listen. If I'd been told that I was witnessing the end of the world, I would have believed it.* This kind of destruction is hard to fathom, but certainly we've seen pictures of it in news reports. How do you think it would affect you? How do you feel about your ability to survive such an event?
- 10) As Dante makes clear to May, the Chinese in San Francisco are integral to the city fabric. They are not only the main source of the city's domestics and low wage workers, but they are also a source of revenue from vice and from shipping. Yet the relationship the city has with the Chinese is fraught in many different ways. Goldie calls them liars, and May at first does not question that assertion. May's uncle has no scruples about trying to destroy Chinatown. Chinese homes and businesses are looted by whites for profit after the earthquake and fire. Yet in the end, they win what they want in the power struggle to keep Chinatown where it is. What do you think about the position of the Chinese in San Francisco, and how does that relate to your own experience with people who are considered to be *other*?
- 11) When Ellis Farge steals May's ideas, what do you think May means when she says his theft is so much more than just a design? How do you think Ellis Farge really felt about his role in the plot against May? What do you believe were his motivations? Do you think the vengeance May took upon him warranted?
- 12) *What a survivor you are, May Kimble. You'll still be among the ruins when the world ends. You don't need me; you don't need anyone.* Do you understand why May finds this an unbearable statement? How would you feel to be told that? Proud? Happy? Sad?
- 13) When May finally discovers her family name, she says, "I could not find my center. I did not know how to feel about it." Why do you suppose this is? Why do you think her realization that "*It doesn't change anything. I'm still me*" isn't true causes such dismay?
- 14) What do you think of May buying Goldie's IOUs from China Joe? Do you believe it when she says she did so to make Goldie suffer? Do you think there was another reason? May's reaction upon seeing Goldie again after the earthquake is one of anger, but also of

bewildered pain. Why do you think she feels that after so long, and after everything that Goldie has done? What do you think about the relationship between May and Goldie? Was there anything real in it?

- 15) After all the destruction, May has the choice to abandon her decision to seek vengeance, to put it all behind her and start over. She does not. What would you have done? When she finally lets go of the vest button that has been her talisman throughout her trials, she says, *Had I been asked, I would have said it was not a burden, that I'd scarcely felt it. Now I knew that wasn't true. It was a relief to release it.* What do you think of the burden of vengeance? What of its moral implications? What do you think of May's ultimate revenge against the Sullivans? Is it worth it? Was it worth it for May?

About writing *A Splendid Ruin*:

San Francisco in the early 1900s was a singular place. "San Francisco is full of excesses, singularities and contradictions. Since the discovery of gold it has abounded in sensations, financial, political, social ... it has been, and still is, American in the extreme, and extravagant, therefore, in everything." (*Boston Herald*). Both elegant and gritty, it was progressive and wild in contrast to its more staid sister city New York, but it was equally invested in social tiers and customs, and as hypocritical when it came to who belonged and who did not—as evidenced by the Friday Night Cotillions and Ned Greenway, and I found those contrasts great fun to work with.

It was also mired in city government corruption. My fictionalized version of Sullivan Building's construction of City Hall is based on its true history. The building took nearly three decades to build, and was marked by incompetence, inferior building materials, bribery and graft. The pillars were in fact hollow and filled with refuse, as were the walls, and it did become the example of poor workmanship and the need for building codes after the earthquake.



(City Hall after the earthquake: Photo from *San Francisco in Ruins*)

The magnitude of the earthquake today is generally agreed to be 7.8, and it set off the many fires that raged for three full days and destroyed the city. The rebuilding of San Francisco was—again—mired in political wrangling. The city had hired Daniel Burnham to design a City Beautification plan, which he'd delivered earlier that year (1906). The plan included boulevards and parks and a subway system, but it was thrown out for many political and financial considerations—and also because business owners opposed it. They wanted to be up and running and the plan would take too long. Not only that, but they were worried about competition from businesses in the unburned part of the city.

Insurers haggled over whether a building was destroyed by the earthquake—which was not insured—or fire, which was. This was complicated by the fact that the city had dynamited many buildings to stop the fire, and the fire itself had destroyed much evidence of earthquake damage. Money was slow in coming. Supplies to rebuild were even harder to come by. Orders at steel mills were backed up for two years. The lumber available from Oregon and Washington was nearly depleted. Countless horses, used as beasts of burden, overworked and underfed because the cost of feed was so high, died in the race to get businesses up and running again.

(Following photos from *San Francisco in Ruins*)





The plot to move Chinatown, as illustrated in the novel, is also a true story. Chinatown properties were some of the best in the city, and the earthquake and fires gave city businessmen an unparalleled opportunity to put their hands on lands they'd lusted over for some time. They expected an easy victory. Racism and prejudice against the Chinese painted Chinatown as not only exotic and exciting, but as a scourge ridden with poverty, disease and vice. But the Chinese had a great deal more financial power than anyone realized. The Six Companies—a consortium of Chinese businesses—were as complicit as anyone in the rampant corruption in San Francisco, but they were also legitimate businesses. They had many financial allies among white interests, and powerful trade connections, and were more than capable of bringing the city to its knees. Their threatened use of that power kept Chinatown right where it was, and brought out into the open the tangled and crucial codependence between the whites in San Francisco and the immigrants who had helped to build it.

At the same time, led by the editor of the *Bulletin*, Fremont Older, a grand jury handed down indictments against Mayor Schmitz and Abe Ruef for extortion and various other charges of corruption. The trial itself became a travesty, complete with shootings, kidnappings, and the dynamiting of the homes of witnesses, and the city was bitterly divided. Schmitz appealed a guilty verdict and won, and Ruef went to prison for a time, but in the end, the people of San Francisco took as pragmatic an approach to corruption as they had to rebuilding, and when it became apparent that the most powerful men in San Francisco, as well as big business, were involved, they lost their appetite for prosecution.



(photo right is of one of Coppia's advertising postcards of one of his famous red walls).

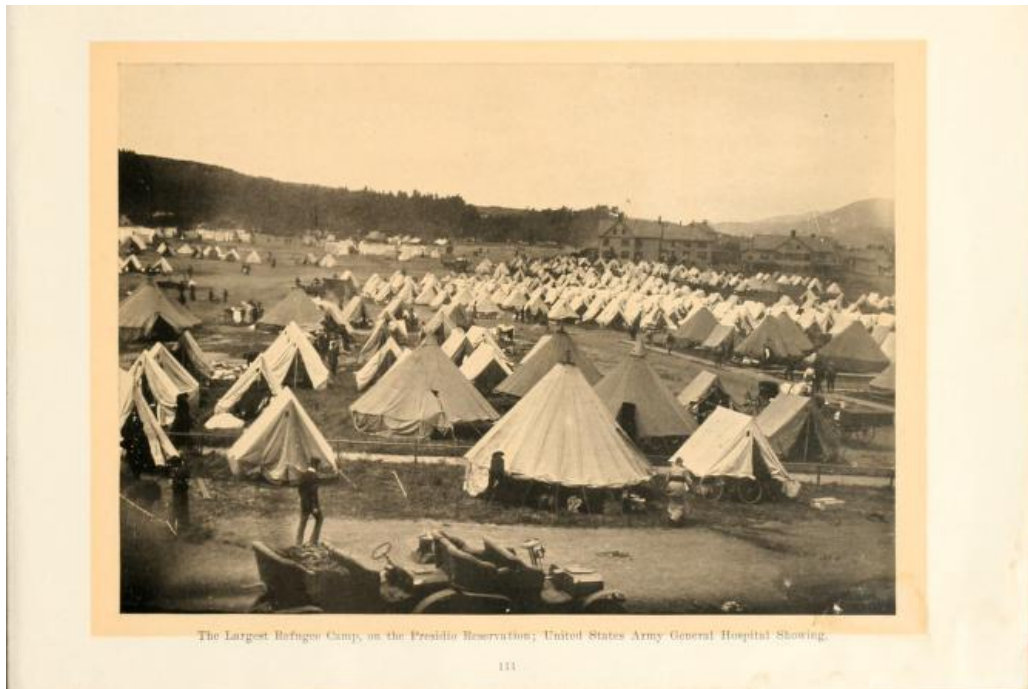
Blessington Asylum is a product of my imagination, but the things that happened there are based on real life stories from inmates of many public and private asylums of the day.

As always, research is one of my favorite things about writing historical fiction. Some of the sources I found most helpful in researching *A Splendid Ruin* were: *The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906*, by Philip R. Fradkin; *Three Fearful Days*, by Malcolm E. Barker; *A Crack in the Edge of the World*, by Simon Winchester; *Chambliss' Diary, or Society as it Really Was*, by William H. Chambliss; and *My Own Story*, by Fremont Older. Also, online, the Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco is marvelous (<http://www.sfmuseum.org>), as is the Bancroft Library at Berkeley online exhibit of the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire (<https://bancroft.berkeley.edu/collections/earthquakeandfire/index2.html>).

The characters are from my imagination, but the plot is a nod to one of my favorite novels of Honore de Balzac: *Cousin Bette*, which is a story of family disloyalty and vengeance, and I am very, very happy to say that no one in my family resembles anyone in that story or this one in any way, shape or form.

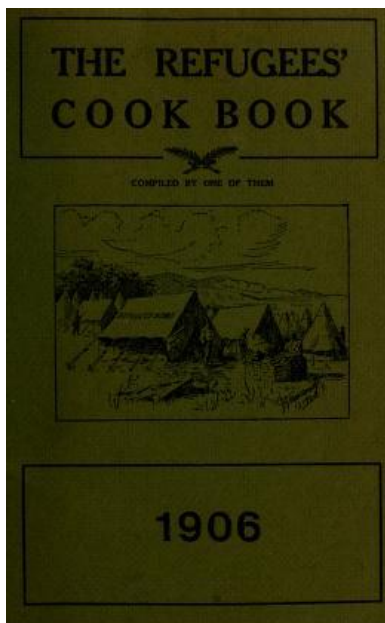
Coppia's Restaurant was a real place (photo credit: Jack or Charmaine London), and the paintings and mottos on the walls were as legendary in their day as Coppia's famous Chicken Portola.





The Largest Refugee Camp, on the Presidio Reservation; United States Army General Hospital Showing.

The Refugee Cookbook was distributed to refugees in camps such as this during construction:



Meats

ROAST BEEF

In roasting meat have oven hot; place a piece of suet on bottom of dripping pan; salt and pepper roast and place in pan; turn frequently; do not use any water.

BOILED MUTTON CAPER SAUCE

Place a leg of mutton in large pot or a steamer, cover tight, and place around it an onion, carrot and turnip, sprig of parsley and bay leaf; when tender remove from fire, and place in a dripping pan, and let brown in oven, using a little fat to prevent burning; baste frequently; take a half pint of the water from kettle it has steamed or boiled in; add a half bottle of capers, a little cream, piece of butter, salt and pepper, thicken with a little flour; use some of the vinegar capers are in; cook sauce well and serve with the mutton; do not bake mutton too long only brown.


REFUGEE STEW

Take three pounds of round of beef cut in medium-sized pieces; take two good sized onions and fry brown in beef dripping; fry meat after sprinkling with flour in the onions very brown turning frequently; put it in a stew kettle and cover with boiling water; let cook very slowly three hours, adding boiling water as it cooks down; an hour before serving add three carrots, three turnips, potatoes, parsnip, parsley, bay leaf; thicken it with one-half cup of flour and teaspoon of caramel; be very careful not to burn; don't use cold water or too much grease.

Refugee Filter

Take a tomato can and perforate the bottom with holes; cover the bottom, with a layer of cotton batting and place five or six tablespoonfuls of pulverized charcoal over it. Pour the boiling water in and let filter through. The water will be clear and free from sediment.

To clear your house or tent of flies—Put a tablespoonful or cayenne pepper in a pan over the fire and let burn; open door, or window, and they will soon all disappear.



The Following photos of Sutros Baths are from a 1985 Promotional Brochure:

