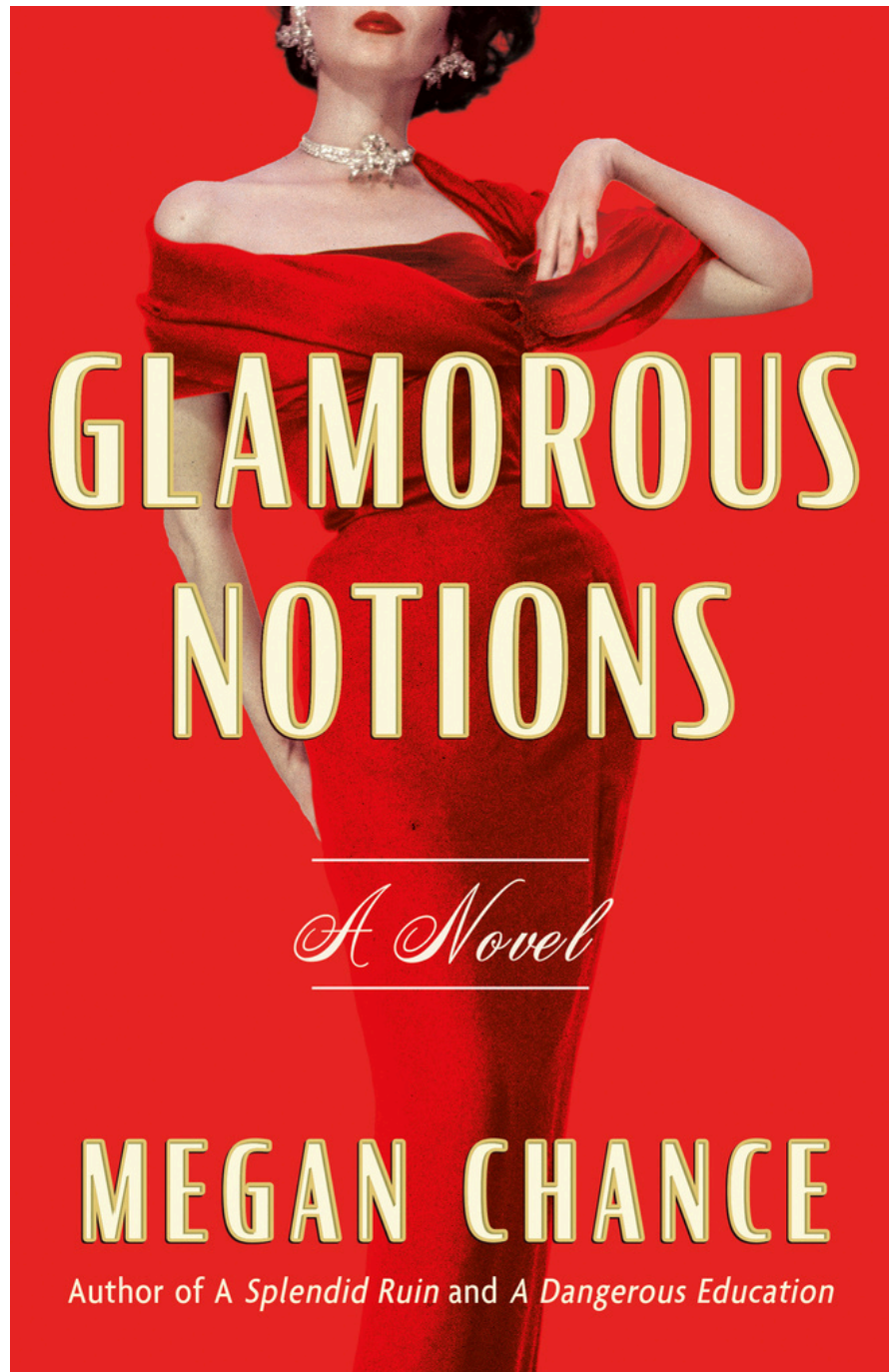


Readers' Guide



GLAMOROUS NOTIONS

A Novel

MEGAN CHANCE

Author of *A Splendid Ruin* and *A Dangerous Education*

A costume designer's past casts a long shadow over her well-constructed lies in this intriguing story about hidden identities, friendship, and betrayal from the author of *A Splendid Ruin* and *A Dangerous Education*.

Hollywood, 1955. As head costume designer for Lux Pictures, Lena Taylor hears startling confessions from the biggest movie stars. She knows how to keep their secrets—after all, none of their scandals can match her own.

Lena was once Elsie Gruner, the daughter of an Ohio dressmaker. Her gift for fashion design helped her win a coveted spot at an art academy in Rome. While in Italy, she became enthralled by the charismatic Julia, who drew her into a shadowy world of jazz clubs, code words, and mysterious deliveries. When one of Julia's intrigues ended in murder, Elsie found herself in the middle of a bewildering sinister international plot. So she
ran.

After fleeing to LA, Elsie became Lena—but she's never stopped looking over her shoulder. Now, as her engagement to a screenwriter throws her into the spotlight, she's terrified her façade won't hold up. Will she figure out the truth about her past before everything falls apart?

Discussion Questions

- 1) Elsie's first decision on her journey to becoming Lena Taylor is to leave her husband, Walter. In the end, her impulsivity here doesn't work in either's favor. What do you think of her decision?
- 2) What do you think of Elsie's relationship with Julia in Rome? Do you think Julia is manipulating her at the start? Is this a real friendship on Julia's part?
- 3) Lena is on the trip of her life in Rome, experiencing new things, living in new ways, finding herself and discovering new possibilities. Given all that, do you understand why she agrees to help Julia, even when she learns Julia and her friends are smuggling? Would you have done such a thing in the same circumstances? What do you think this says about who Lena is?
- 4) What are Lena's vulnerabilities that both Walter and Julia exploit?
- 5) Julia says the best way to change the world is through the things people love, not through politics. Do you think she's right? In what ways do you see examples of this?
- 6) The story of Larry Lipton and his Sunday gatherings of Beat poets in Venice beach is true. Lena and Paul stop going to these gatherings out of caution; they also stop visiting Harvey and Charlie for the same reasons. The surveillance of the FBI and other organizations at this time for possible communists was prevalent and truly frightening given what the accusation of communism could do to a person's life and career. What do you think you would have done in this time period? Do you think the "cancel culture" of today is similar? In what ways? What do you think it says about the state of American thought/politics at this period that bohemian artists were in danger of being considered to be communist influencers, or communists themselves?
- 7) The phrase "the people's capitalism" was used in the cold war in the fight against communism, to convince the Soviets, and anyone else doubting the benefits of capitalism, that corporations were working in the best interests of the consumers, and that the people themselves benefited from their relationship with corporations. Do you think this phrasing worked? How do you think it influenced how Americans felt about capitalism in the 1950s? In what ways do you see its influence today, and do you see a difference in how consumers view capitalism in this era?

8) The first time Lena meets Paul Carbone, he talks about his wish to infiltrate the system and change it from the inside out. How does his wish come to fruition—or not? Do you think it possible to do what he hopes for?

9) The Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, of which both Hedda Hopper and Cecil B DeMille were members, was dedicated to the idea of promoting American morality through the movies. Some members were avid Communist hunters and red-baiters. When you add to that the Hays Production code, and the blacklist of screen writers thought to be communists or otherwise subversive, the pressure on those working in film to adhere to certain ways of thinking during the Cold War period was enormous. Ultimately, the backlash, when it came in the 1970s, changed attitudes, but by then many careers had been ruined. Can you think of movies from the 50s that propagated Cold War propaganda, and those from the 70s that were the backlash?

10) Do you think Lena makes a mistake in hiding so completely from the past? Given the attitudes of the 1950s and the fears of Communism and the threats of career destruction, should she have tried to find out what happened and to try to resolve her past before she went on with her future? Why or why not?

11) Once Lena and Paul become engaged, do you think Lena is right to keep her past from him? Do you understand the reasons why she does? Do you think those reasons are valid enough to justify her lies?

12) Lena goes to Higgy Braxton's office to complain about Michael Runyon's changes to *Club Medusa*, but ends up not confronting him. She is a woman in a male-dominated field, and the tensions between creativity/money/position/sexism are delicate and ever present. How are these still issues today?

13) Lena says to Paul that he has so much talent, but he has to have successes under his belt before he can afford to be called difficult—what do you think about this? Do you think she's right? What does this say about the world in general if she is? Do you think it still true today? How does this make you feel about the nature of success?

14) Michael Runyon says, “No one doubts the great capabilities of women, but this? Where in this film are the family values? Women raising strong, happy children? Where are the self-made men? ...Women on their own, relying on each other, well . . . that’s not the right message. It’s vaguely . . . one could almost say it’s morally decadent, don’t you think?” The Campaign for Truth was a propaganda program put in place by the Psychological Warfare workshop of the CIA to counter Soviet propaganda and fight communism, and they used movies, music and literature to do it. At the time, it was impossible for Americans to believe that their own government could be working to manipulate them, but in fact it was true, and this propaganda infiltrated American culture. How do you see the effects of it even now?

15) “Instead she went to her apartment, wondering what made people say things about her like *she’s good at getting what she wants*, and why that wasn’t a badge of honor.” Why isn’t it, for a woman?

16) What part of Lena’s returning past surprised you? What did you not expect?

17) “‘Wives are the strength of our nation,’ Hedda went on, finishing her lobster. ‘But only when they support their men. The Reds can only hope our women abandon their families for careers that ‘complete them.’ Such nonsense. Children will complete you when you have them.’” These words of Hedda Hopper’s are a paraphrased but accurate reflection of her real-life statements, and the kind of statements that were often made by the U.S. government in the fight against the Soviets during the Cold War. What kind of effect do you think they had on the United States culturally in the years after the Cold War, and do you think they still impact women and society today? In what ways?

18) By the time Lena realizes Julia is a Russian spy, she recognizes that she should have known this for some time. Why do you think Lena has hidden this from herself?

19) Do you think Lena is right to choose Julia over the U.S. government and the CIA? Do you understand why she did it? Do you think she was right to feel so conflicted over it? Do you think Julia was worth her act of treason?

20) Paul says of Michael Runyon’s decision to join the CIA: “...he’d seen enough suffering during the war, and he’d chosen a side, and that side was America. He said that when your adversary has no scruples, you shouldn’t have them, either, and if that meant he needed a dead conscience, then he was fine with that, and one day I’d be grateful he’d made that decision.” What do you think of Runyon’s words here, and his decision? How do you feel about what he says?

Resources (Links)

[Pinterest](#) page for *Glamorous Notions*

[Bone Music](#) website

[Hiroshima/Nagasaki footage](#) article

Footage of [Hiroshima/Nagasaki](#)

Rome in the Holy [Year](#) of 1951 footage

Historic [Hollywood](#) Photos

Recipes

Pasta Amatriciana (courtesy Alison Roman)

Ingredients

- 2 tablespoons olive oil, plus more if you like
- ¼ pound guanciale or pancetta, cut into ½” cubes
- 1 small red onion, thinly sliced
- Kosher salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 1/2 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes, plus more
- 1 28 oz. can whole peeled crushed tomatoes, or whole peeled tomatoes, crushed
- 12 oz. rigatoni, bucatini, spaghetti or honestly, whatever shape you like
- Pecorino romano, for grating

Directions

1. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Heat 2 tablespoons olive oil in a large skillet over medium–low heat. Add the guanciale and cook, stirring occasionally, until most of the fat has rendered and the guanciale is lightly golden brown, 10–15 minutes (prioritize rendering the fat rather than crisping the meat).
2. Increase heat to medium–high and add onions. Cook, stirring occasionally, until onions are tender, lightly fried on the ends and on their way to being a little frizzled (not jammy or caramelized, more like fried and still somewhat intact), 5–8 minutes. Add 1/2 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes, letting them toast in the rendered fat for 30–60 seconds or so.
3. Add tomatoes, season with salt and pepper, and reduce the heat so the sauce is moving at a gentle simmer. Cook, stirring every so often for 15–20 minutes, or until the sauce has thickened to your liking. Remove from heat and set aside while you cook the pasta.
3. Cook pasta according to the box instructions to a nice al dente, 8–10 minutes (timing will depend on the type and brand of pasta). Drain, reserving about 1 cup of pasta water (alternatively, leave pasta in the water and remove with a slotted spoon, leaving the pasta water behind).
4. Add the pasta and ½ cup pasta water to the sauce and cook, tossing frequently, until pasta is just past al dente and the sauce has thickened gorgeously, 3–4 minutes. You can always add more water if you like to make it even saucier, personal choice here. Remove from heat. Toss to combine and warm through to take the edge off a little. Give it a taste and season with salt, pepper and more crushed red pepper flakes, if you like.
5. To serve, divide the pasta among how many ever serving bowls you need, making sure each has plenty of sauce, too. Top with lots of pecorino and maybe more crushed red pepper flakes, perhaps a drizzle of olive oil.

Martini

1/2 oz (1 part) Dry vermouth,
3 oz (6 parts) Gin

Pour all ingredients into mixing glass with ice cubes. Stir well. Strain in chilled martini cocktail glass. Squeeze oil from lemon peel onto the drink, or garnish with olive.

American

1 oz Campari
1 oz Red Vermouth
Soda Water

Pour the Campari and vermouth over ice into glass, add a splash of soda water and garnish with half orange slice.

Negroni

1 oz Campari
1 oz gin
1 oz red vermouth

Shake or stir together with ice. Pour into glass. Garnish with cherry and half orange slice.

Spaghetti with Eggs (Courtesy Mark Bittman)

Yield: 2 or 3 servings

- Salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ pound thin spaghetti
- 6 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil or lard
- 2 large cloves garlic, lightly smashed and peeled
- 4 eggs
- Freshly ground black pepper
- Freshly grated Parmesan or pecorino cheese, optional

1. Step 1
2. Bring a pot of salted water to the boil. Start the sauce in the next step, and start cooking the pasta when the water boils.
3. Step 2
4. Combine garlic and 4 tablespoons of the oil in a small skillet over medium-low heat. Cook the garlic, pressing it into the oil occasionally to release its flavor; it should barely color on both sides. Remove the garlic, and add the remaining oil.
5. Step 3
Fry the eggs gently in the oil, until the whites are just about set and the yolks still quite runny. Drain the pasta, and toss with the eggs and oil, breaking up the whites as you do. (The eggs will finish cooking in the heat of the pasta.)
Season to taste, and serve immediately, with cheese if you like.

Brown Derby Chiffon Cake (Courtesy 1949 *Brown Derby Cookbook*)

16 servings

Ingredients

- 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups flour
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups sugar
- 3 tsp baking powder
- 1 tsp salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup vegetable oil
- 5 medium-sized egg yolks, unbeaten
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup cold water
- 2 tsp vanilla
- grated rind 1 lemon (optional)
- 7-8 egg whites
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp cream of tartar

Step 1/6

Sift the dry ingredients – flour, sugar, baking powder and salt – into a mixing bowl, and make a well in the center.

Step 2/6

One by one, add the wet ingredients – oil, egg yolks, water, vanilla and lemon rind. Mix with wooden spoon until the batter is completely smooth.

Step 3/6

In another bowl, whip the egg whites and cream of tartar until stiff peaks are formed.

Step 4/6

Gently fold the whipped egg whites into the batter until blended with a rubber scraper or a heavy spoon.

Step 5/6

Transfer the mixture into an ungreased baking pan. If you use a 10-inch long and 4-inch deep tube, bake for 55 minutes at 325°F. Increase the temperature to 350 °F and bake for 10-15 more minutes. If you prepare the chiffon cake in a 2-inch deep, 9 per 13-inch oblong pan, bake for 45-50 minutes on 350 °F.

When the cake becomes spongy, it is done.

Step 6/6

Turn the pan upside down, leave the cake to cool and gently remove from pan.