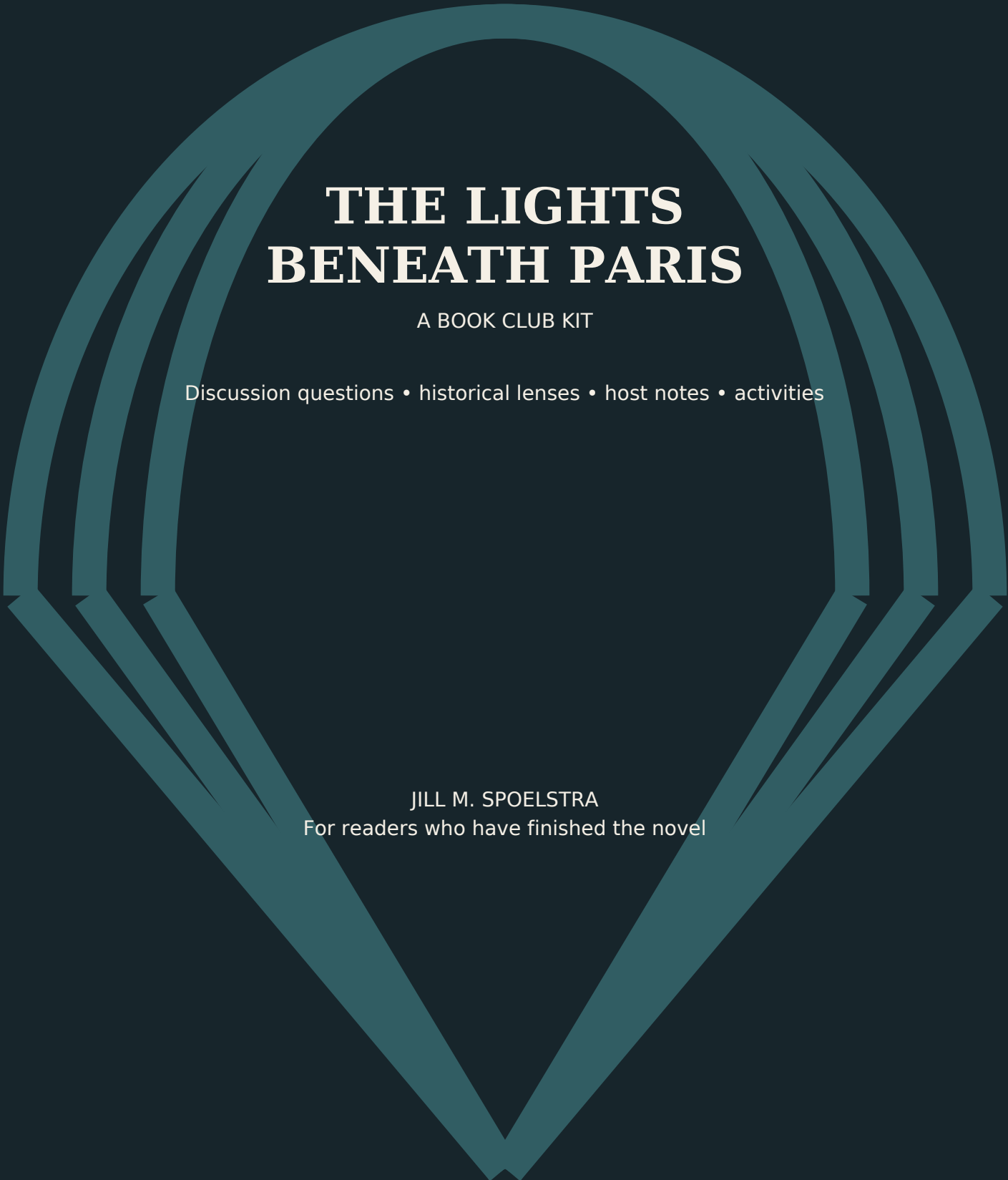




THE LIGHTS BENEATH PARIS

A BOOK CLUB KIT

Discussion questions • historical lenses • host notes • activities

JILL M. SPOELSTRA

For readers who have finished the novel

A guide for conversations that linger

The Lights Beneath Paris asks what ordinary people owe one another when obedience is safer, silence is easier, and every choice carries a cost. This kit is designed to move a group from first reactions into the novel's hardest questions: the difference between order and morality, the many shapes resistance can take, and whether a person can recognize evil while still helping it function.

Spoiler notice

This guide discusses the entire novel, including Lucienne's final confrontation with Lukas and the 1956 epilogue. It is intended for readers who have finished the book.

HOW TO USE THIS KIT

A typical 60- to 90-minute meeting will not need every question. Begin with two warm-up questions, choose six to eight from the central sections, and save one "after the last page" question for the end. The host notes offer optional follow-ups, not preferred answers.

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Opening the conversation

- 01 What image, scene, or small detail from the novel stayed with you most strongly after you finished?
- 02 Before the first major acts of resistance occur, what did you expect the title *The Lights Beneath Paris* to mean? How did that meaning change by the end?
- 03 Which part of the book created the greatest sense of tension for you: the public streets, the private homes, or the tunnels? Why?
- 04 Whose choices did you find easiest to understand? Whose did you resist or judge most strongly?
- 05 The story begins in September 1939, before occupation has transformed daily life. Which gradual change made the loss of ordinary Paris feel most real to you?

HOST FOLLOW-UP

If the group answers mainly with plot events, ask what emotion the chosen scene produced: dread, anger, hope, grief, frustration, or relief. The emotional answer often reveals the theme a reader connected with most.

A QUICK ROUND

Ask each person to describe the novel in three words. Record them before discussing. At the end of the meeting, return to the list and ask which word the conversation complicated.

Lucienne: knowledge becomes courage

- 06 Lucienne's position with the quarry inspectors begins as an opportunity partly secured through her father's influence. How does she transform an unearned opening into expertise that no one else can replace?
- 07 At the start, the tunnels give Lucienne solitude, structure, and a connection to her grandfather. By 1943, they have become a route for survival and a place of trauma. At what point do you think her relationship with the underground changes most decisively?
- 08 Lucienne's resistance begins not with a weapon but with incomplete and misleading maps. Does the quietness of her first act make it less brave, more brave, or simply a different kind of bravery?
- 09 Lucienne repeatedly minimizes what she has done, even in 1956 when Thomas Bennett says she saved him. Why might "we helped" feel truer or safer to her than "we saved him"?
- 10 How much of Lucienne's courage comes from conviction, and how much comes from the practical fact that she possesses knowledge others need? Would she have entered the resistance without the tunnels?

LOOK AGAIN

Lucienne's attention to overlooked seams, markings, distances, and sounds is established before those skills become life-saving. Discuss whether courage in the novel is presented as a sudden transformation or as ordinary qualities redirected toward an extraordinary need.

Lukas: order without conscience

- 11 Lukas thinks of roads, bridges, railways, and tunnels as systems to be understood and controlled. How does this habit of reducing places and people to systems protect him from moral responsibility?
- 12 When Lukas witnesses Jewish families being forced into trucks, his discomfort centers partly on the public disorder of the scene. What is the difference between recognizing cruelty and objecting to the discomfort of witnessing it?
- 13 Lukas often tells himself that he has no choice. Identify moments when the novel quietly exposes choices he refuses to name. Which one matters most?
- 14 How did Lukas's family history, his father's teaching about duty, his mother's illness, and Klara's condemnation affect your judgment of him? Do explanations risk becoming excuses?
- 15 Lukas's search for the underground network becomes increasingly obsessive, even after Adler orders him away. Is he driven most by duty, wounded pride, loneliness, the need to prove himself right, or something else?
- 16 After shooting Lucienne, Lukas admits to himself that "I had no choice" is a lie. Does that moment of truth have moral value when it comes too late to change his action?

HOST FOLLOW-UP

The richest version of this discussion separates sympathy from absolution. A reader can understand how Lukas became who he is without deciding that his suffering balances the harm he causes.

Mirrors, maps, and moral choice

- 17 Lucienne and Lukas are both meticulous surveyors drawn to order, hidden structures, and accurate maps. Why do nearly identical talents lead them toward opposite moral purposes?
- 18 Lucienne alters maps to create freedom; Lukas corrects maps to extend control. What does the novel suggest about whether knowledge itself is neutral?
- 19 Both characters believe they see what others overlook. Where does Lucienne's attention make her more human, while Lukas's makes him less able to see humanity?
- 20 The two spend much of the novel moving toward each other without fully meeting. How does the alternating perspective change the suspense? Did knowing Lukas's thoughts make Lucienne feel safer, or more endangered?
- 21 Lukas initially assumes any flaws in Lucienne's quarry maps must be an innocent oversight. What role do sexism, arrogance, and his belief in institutional authority play in that mistake?
- 22 In the confrontation, Lukas expects the enemy he has imagined to be a man like Adrien, not Lucienne. What does his surprise reveal about whom regimes consider dangerous and whom they underestimate?

THE CENTRAL PARALLEL

Maps do not merely describe the world in this novel. They decide who can move, who can hide, who can pursue, and who can escape. Ask the group: when information determines another person's fate, what obligations belong to the person who controls it?

Love, loyalty, and the cost of resistance

- 23** Adrien arrives carrying the uncertainty of Matthieu's fate as well as his own survivor's guilt. How does that loss shape the love that grows between him and Lucienne?
- 24** Lucienne tells Adrien to leave with the final group and return when the war is over. Was her demand loving, unfair, practical, or all three?
- 25** Adrien breaks his promise and returns for her. In another story, keeping his promise might be called honorable. What does the novel argue about the limits of obedience, even to someone we love?
- 26** Simone, Monsieur and Isabelle Roche, Lucienne's parents, Adrien, and the unnamed members of the network contribute in different ways. Which forms of resistance receive the least recognition, both in the novel and in our memory of war?
- 27** Lucienne keeps her work hidden partly to protect those she loves. When does secrecy become an act of love, and when can it become a barrier between people?
- 28** The novel repeatedly shows that rescue depends on chains of people rather than a lone hero. How does that complicate the way we usually tell stories about courage?

A QUESTION OF SCALE

Consider the contrast between dramatic acts and sustaining acts: carrying messages, providing bread, treating a wound, opening a door after curfew, remembering a route, or refusing to ask a dangerous question.

Paris above and below

- 29** Above ground, occupation makes people visible to checkpoints, notices, uniforms, ration lines, and neighbors. Below ground, darkness creates both danger and possibility. Which world is actually more truthful?
- 30** The catacombs hold the carefully arranged remains of the dead while the quarry routes carry living people toward safety. How does the closeness of death intensify the novel's argument for protecting life?
- 31** Sound behaves differently underground: footsteps travel, gunshots multiply, and silence demands interpretation. How does the novel use sound to make readers share Lucienne's vigilance?
- 32** Lucienne's grandfather teaches her that the stone will reveal what does not fit. How does that lesson apply beyond the literal tunnels—to propaganda, social behavior, and moral compromise?
- 33** Paris continues to eat, work, flirt, shop, and wait as persecution grows. Did these ordinary routines feel like resilience, denial, necessary survival, or some combination?
- 34** Why does Lucienne never return to the tunnels after the war? Do you read her decision as trauma, reverence, relinquishment, or a completed calling?

SYMBOLS TO TRACE

Lantern light; maps and chalk marks; sealed doors; bread and coffee; uniforms; bones; letters from home; thresholds. Choose one and follow how its meaning changes from the beginning to the end.

The ending and the life after

- 35** Lukas dies with the thought that he should be on a train. What does that final sentence emphasize: regret, self-pity, the randomness of consequence, or the nearness of an unchosen alternative?
- 36** Adrien finds Lucienne by following the subtle chalk marks she once left for others. Why is it fitting that her own careful preparation becomes part of her rescue?
- 37** Lucienne survives, but the novel refuses to present survival as a clean return to normal. What traces of war remain in the farmhouse in 1956?
- 38** Thomas Bennett's visit gives Lucienne and Adrien evidence of a life that continued because of their actions. Why might one known survivor matter differently from the many people they helped but never saw again?
- 39** Lucienne and Adrien have not fully told their children who they were during the occupation. Were they protecting the children, protecting themselves, or preserving the ordinary life they built?
- 40** The novel ends as they begin telling the story. What might change within the family once the children understand their parents' past?
- 41** Did the epilogue give you closure, or did it deliberately reopen the story by showing that remembrance is another form of responsibility?

FINAL IMAGE

The tunnels once conceal the living from danger; decades later, silence conceals the parents' history from their children. Discuss the difference between a secret that saves a life and a secret whose time may have passed.

Questions that may divide the room

- 42 Is refusing to participate in evil enough, or does morality eventually require active resistance?
- 43 At what point does a person inside an unjust system become responsible for the system's outcomes, even if their own duties appear technical or administrative?
- 44 Would Lucienne have been justified in stopping before the final journey? Do people with rare, life-saving abilities owe more than others, or is that expectation itself unjust?
- 45 Is courage best measured by the danger someone accepts, the number of people helped, the purity of the motive, or the decision to act despite fear?
- 46 Who carries the greater burden: the person who makes a terrible choice, the person who survives it, or the person who arrives too late to prevent it?
- 47 Can love flourish ethically during catastrophe, or does private happiness become a kind of moral escape? How does Lucienne and Adrien's relationship answer that question?
- 48 If you could ask Lukas one question before the final confrontation, what would you ask? If you could ask Lucienne one question in 1956, what would it be?

NO EASY CONSENSUS REQUIRED

A strong book-club conversation does not need to resolve these questions. Invite members to identify the scene that supports their position, then ask what evidence might make them reconsider.

Historical lenses for discussion

The novel places fictional lives inside real pressures that changed between 1939 and 1943. These brief lenses are conversation starters rather than a complete history.

THE FALL AND OCCUPATION OF PARIS

German forces entered Paris in June 1940. The occupation reshaped public space through military presence, curfews, requisitions, propaganda, censorship, identity checks, and a constant negotiation between outward compliance and private feeling.

PERSECUTION AND DEPORTATION

Anti-Jewish measures escalated through registration, exclusion, arrests, confiscation, the compulsory yellow star in the occupied zone in 1942, roundups, and deportations. The novel's scenes of families waiting under guard ask readers to confront how persecution becomes visible, organized, and bureaucratic.

MONT-VALÉRIEN

The fortress west of Paris became the principal execution site used by German authorities in occupied France for resistance fighters and hostages. In the novel, Lucienne's proximity to the executions collapses the distance between rumor and physical knowledge.

FORCED LABOR

The Service du travail obligatoire, instituted in 1943, compelled French workers to labor in Germany. Its arrival intensifies the threat around Adrien and makes escape no longer only an act of resistance, but a matter of immediate survival.

THE UNDERGROUND

Paris rests above an extensive network of former limestone quarries, with the municipal inspection service responsible for mapping and stabilizing dangerous voids. The novel builds its fictional escape network from this real subterranean geography.

DISCUSS WITH CARE

Historical fiction can create emotional access to the past, but fictional characters should not replace the testimony of people who lived it. If your club wants to continue, seek survivor accounts and materials from institutions such as the Mémorial de la Shoah, the Musée de la Libération de Paris, and the Mont-Valérien memorial.

Seven lesser-known facts behind the atmosphere

1. The Catacombs are only one small part of the underground. The famous ossuary occupies former quarry passages, but “the Catacombs” is not an accurate name for the entire network beneath Paris. Much of the wider system consists of old limestone quarries without bones.
2. The bones were moved because the living city had a sanitation crisis. After the Saints-Innocents cemetery was closed, remains from Paris cemeteries were transferred underground beginning in the 1780s. The carefully arranged walls of skulls and long bones were shaped especially under Inspector Héricart de Thury in the early nineteenth century.
3. Paris prepared for poison gas on a massive scale. Beginning in the 1930s, authorities developed tens of thousands of civil-defense shelters. Some were designed to keep government and transport services operating during attack; hundreds were intended to be gas-tight.
4. A railway bunker remained useful to both sides. A roughly 120-square-meter shelter beneath the Gare de l’Est was designed so railway staff could keep trains moving during an air or gas attack. German occupiers took control of the strategic site in 1940.
5. Identification on the street was a weapon. A German decree required Jews in the occupied zone to wear the yellow star beginning June 7, 1942. Visibility, paperwork, travel rules, and police checks made ordinary movement dangerous.
6. The largest Paris roundup was carried out by French police. On July 16-17, 1942, roughly 13,000 Jews were arrested in the Vél d’Hiv roundup; many were later deported through Drancy to Auschwitz. This complicates any simple division between German perpetrators and a passive occupied population.
7. The underground helped direct Paris’s liberation. From August 20-28, 1944, Colonel Henri Rol-Tanguy and the regional FFI staff worked from a command post about twenty meters beneath Place Denfert-Rochereau, issuing orders during the insurrection.

BOOK CONNECTION

These facts deepen several recurring pressures in the novel: who can move unseen, who is made deliberately visible, how bureaucracy becomes violence, and why control of maps and infrastructure matters.

A short history beneath Paris

ANCIENT STONE, A GROWING CITY

The limestone beneath Paris was quarried for centuries and helped build the city above it. By the fourteenth century, extraction had moved underground. As Paris expanded over abandoned voids, collapses became a serious urban danger.

THE INSPECTION SERVICE

A catastrophic collapse at Rue d'Enfer in 1774 helped force official action. Louis XVI created the Inspection générale des carrières in 1777 to map, reinforce, and monitor the quarries. Lucienne's profession is therefore grounded in a real municipal responsibility with enormous consequences for public safety.

THE MUNICIPAL OSSUARY

The former Tombe-Issoire quarries were consecrated as the municipal ossuary in 1786. Bones from overcrowded and closed cemeteries were transferred there through 1814, with later deposits continuing into the nineteenth century. The public could visit by appointment beginning in 1809.

WAR CHANGES THE PURPOSE OF DEPTH

In modern war, underground space offered protection from bombardment, continuity for essential services, secure communications, storage, and concealment. Metro stations, cellars, quarry-adjacent shelters, and purpose-built bunkers all became part of wartime Paris below ground.

AUGUST 1944

During the liberation, the FFI command post beneath Denfert-Rochereau received messengers and telephone calls, coordinated operations, and connected to municipal networks. German authorities knew the shelter existed on official quarry maps, yet did not discover its clandestine role.

A USEFUL DISTINCTION

The ossuary, the old quarry network, métro tunnels, cellars, sewers, and wartime shelters are connected in the popular imagination, but they are not one freely traversable underground maze. Fiction often compresses or links these different spaces for narrative purposes.

How were the tunnels actually used in wartime?

WHAT IS WELL DOCUMENTED

Civil defense: underground shelters protected residents and kept essential services functioning during air raids. The métro served both as transportation and refuge.

Military and transport infrastructure: the bunker beneath the Gare de l'Est supported railway operations and was occupied by German forces after 1940.

Resistance command: Rol-Tanguy's FFI headquarters operated in an underground shelter at Denfert-Rochereau during the final week of occupation in August 1944. Its communications network was central to the Paris insurrection.

Concealment and clandestine access: cellars, shelters, and underground rooms could hide people, meetings, messages, equipment, and movement. Surviving sites and records demonstrate that secrecy below ground was materially useful.

WHAT IS PLAUSIBLE BUT SHOULD BE PHRASED CAREFULLY

Individuals familiar with quarry entrances could move through sections that outsiders found confusing or dangerous. Unofficial exploration and concealed access were possible. However, isolated use does not prove the existence of one continuous, citywide resistance highway.

WHAT IS NOT ESTABLISHED AS THE NOVEL PRESENTS IT

The available authoritative histories do not document a sustained 1941-43 escape operation matching Lucienne's network: repeated groups of Jewish refugees and Allied airmen led across Paris through a connected quarry route to safe houses. That element should be described as fictional, inspired by genuine underground geography and real clandestine wartime uses.

WHY THAT IS STILL HISTORICALLY RESPONSIBLE FICTION

The novel does not require the reader to believe Lucienne was a forgotten real person. It asks what someone with her real-world expertise might have been able to attempt. The setting supplies authentic constraints; the characters and rescue route create the story.

Where the novel stays close—and where it imagines

ELEMENT	ASSESSMENT	WHY
Paris quarry inspection and mapping	ROOTED IN HISTORY	The city maintained a formal inspection service to survey and stabilize former quarries.
A woman holding Lucienne's exact role	FICTIONAL / PLAUSIBLE FRAME	Lucienne and her appointment are fictional. The novel uses family influence and demonstrated skill to explain an unusual position.
Vast old quarry passages beneath Paris	ROOTED IN HISTORY	The network is real, though the book necessarily simplifies access and connectivity.
The ossuary's arranged bones	ROOTED IN HISTORY	The municipal ossuary and its deliberate arrangements are real; it represents only part of the underground.
German interest in underground infrastructure	HISTORICALLY GROUNDED	German forces used strategic underground sites, while authorities relied on maps and infrastructure control.
Lucienne's organized escape route, 1941-43	INVENTED FOR THE NOVEL	No authoritative source located documents this particular sustained quarry rescue network.
Allied airmen moved through escape lines	ROOTED IN BROADER HISTORY	Real escape networks hid and moved downed airmen, usually through chains of helpers, safe houses, forged papers, and routes out of France.
Persecution, stars, roundups, rationing, curfews	ROOTED IN HISTORY	These pressures reflect documented occupation policies and daily conditions.
Executions at Mont-Valérien	ROOTED IN HISTORY	More than one thousand people were shot there by German forces from 1941 to 1944.
FFI underground headquarters	ROOTED IN HISTORY, LATER	The documented Denfert-Rochereau command post became operational in August 1944, after the novel's 1943 climax.

The phrase historically plausible is not the same as documented as having happened. Naming that boundary openly strengthens the novel rather than weakening it.

Sources and further reading

These institutions provide accessible starting points for clubs that want to separate documented history from legend.

Paris Catacombs, official history. Chronology of the quarries, creation of the Inspection service, transformation into the municipal ossuary, bone transfers, and public opening.
catacombes.paris.fr/en/history/site-history

City of Paris, “Paris underground: forgotten refuges of the Second World War.” Civil-defense planning, métro shelters, the Gare de l’Est bunker, and the FFI command post.
paris.fr/pages/paris-sous-terre-ces-refuges-oublies-de-la-seconde-guerre-mondiale-8124

Musée de la Libération de Paris. The preserved command post of Colonel Rol-Tanguy and its role from August 20-28, 1944.
museeliberation-leclerc-moulin.paris.fr

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. The Vél d’Hiv roundup, persecution in Paris, yellow-star decree, French police participation, deportations, and survivor testimony.
encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-velodrome-dhiver-vel-dhiv-roundup

Chemins de mémoire / Mont-Valérien. The site’s history as the principal German execution location in occupied France, where more than one thousand hostages and condemned resistance members were killed.
cheminsdememoire.gouv.fr/fr/le-mont-valerien-lieu-dhistoire-lieu-de-memoire

SOURCE NOTE

The historical comparison in this kit uses cautious language where evidence is limited. Absence from these sources cannot prove that no individual ever used a quarry passage to hide or escape; it means a network matching the novel should not be presented as established fact without stronger archival evidence.

A simple 75-minute meeting plan

TIME	CONVERSATION
0-10 min	Three-word reactions and favorite image
10-25 min	Lucienne, Lukas, and the two uses of maps
25-45 min	Love, complicity, and resistance
45-60 min	Ending and 1956 epilogue
60-70 min	One divisive question
70-75 min	Final reflection: what does light mean now?

OPTIONAL ACTIVITIES

Map the moral turning points. Draw a simple line from September 1939 to June 1943. Let each member place one scene where Lucienne moves toward resistance or Lukas moves toward complicity. Compare where the group believes a choice becomes irreversible.

Above / below. Divide a page in two. Collect words associated with Paris above ground and the tunnels below. Then circle any word that belongs on both sides.

A modest French table. Keep the gathering simple: bread, apricot jam, coffee or tea, and a French pastry. The point is atmosphere and the recurring hospitality of the novel, not reenactment.

Write the untold beginning. After discussing the epilogue, spend five minutes writing the first sentence Lucienne or Adrien might say to their children. Share only if comfortable.

CONTENT NOTE FOR HOSTS

The novel includes war, antisemitic persecution, executions, forced labor, imprisonment, family loss, gun violence, and injury. A brief notice before the meeting can help readers decide how they wish to participate.

BONUS

A conversation with Jill M. Spoelstra

If the author joins your meeting, these questions invite answers that go beyond plot summary. They can also be used as prompts for an author interview, newsletter, podcast, or written Q&A.;

- 01 The novel began with a research question about how the tunnels beneath Paris were used during wartime. What was the first image or scene that made the idea feel like a novel rather than a short story?
- 02 Why did you choose to make Lucienne and Lukas intellectual mirrors—two surveyors whose similar skills serve opposite ends?
- 03 Which historical discovery most changed the story you thought you were writing?
- 04 How did you decide how much interior access to give Lukas without softening his responsibility?
- 05 Was there a character whose role grew unexpectedly during drafting?
- 06 Which scene was emotionally hardest to write? Which was the most satisfying?
- 07 How did writing in the brief, interrupted spaces of motherhood shape the book's pace or emotional focus?
- 08 What do you hope readers understand about ordinary resistance after closing the book?
- 09 What is one historical detail you loved but could not fit naturally into the novel?
- 10 When Thomas Bennett arrives in 1956, what did you most want his visit to give Lucienne, Adrien, and the reader?

INVITE THE AUTHOR

Book clubs may wish to ask whether a virtual author visit is available. Include the meeting date, time zone, expected group size, and whether the club prefers a short Q&A; or a longer discussion.

Notes and questions to carry forward

A passage we returned to:

A question we could not settle:

A character we understood differently by the end:

What “light” means in the novel:

What we want to learn next:

Thank you for reading—and for keeping the conversation alive.

The Lights Beneath Paris by Jill M. Spoelstra • Book club kit prepared for readers of the novel