CARNEGIE'S
MAID

a novel

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READING GROUP GUIDE

1. *Carnegie's Maid* opens with Clara Kelley's experience immigrating to America from Ireland in the 1860s. Do any aspects of Clara's immigration surprise you, such as the ship voyage or the arrival inspection? If you were in Clara's shoes, how would you feel going through the immigration process? Does Clara's experience mirror that of you or someone in your own family?

2. How does Clara's identity as an Irish Catholic immigrant affect her in America? If immigrating today, what similar or different challenges would Clara face?

3. Andrew Carnegie's history has been described as the greatest rags-to-riches American story, and in some ways, Clara's story mirrors his. Did you find her rise—though not as meteoric as Andrew's due to gender constrictions—believable? If not, would you find it more believable if she'd been a man? If the story were set in today's world, how would Andrew's and Clara's stories change? Would Clara still face the same challenges?

4. Compare and contrast Andrew and Clara. How are they similar? How are they different? Who do you relate to more?

5. While Clara inhabits and works in a traditional nineteenth-century women's realm, she aspires to achievements that would have been perceived as exclusively male. Discuss the spheres

available to women at that time and the ways both Clara and Margaret Carnegie operated outside those spheres. Did anything about their allotted domains surprise you? What do you think about the capacity for change in the women's realm? Do you think there is still an opportunity and need for change today?

6. The novel takes place in a unique moment in American history—just as the Civil War ends and the Gilded Age begins, showcasing a world on the cusp of tremendous change industrially, politically, economically, and socially. How does this historical setting affect the characters? What role, if any, does it play in shaping their lives? Does it provide them with opportunities they would not otherwise have?

7. What is something you learned about this time period or Andrew Carnegie that fascinated you? If you could live during the Gilded Age, would you? What would your life be like?

8. Commitment and duty to her family in Ireland influence Clara tremendously. How does this sense of duty motivate her decisions and actions? How does it affect her ability to stay on the path she's carved for herself? Is Andrew prompted by the same responsibilities, or does he have different drives? If you were in Clara's shoes, what would drive you forward?

9. Andrew and Clara's master-servant relationship changes during the course of the book. How does this evolution happen? What do you think it was that drew them together? Do you think their relationship could have lasted longer under different circumstances? How did you feel about the outcome of their relationship?

10. The title of the novel is subject to several interpretations. What

meanings can you glean from the title, and how did your under-standing of the meaning of *Carnegie's Maid* change from the beginning to the end of the novel, if at all?

11. Andrew Carnegie is a well-known industrialist who was the richest man in the world in his day and the founder of modern philanthropy. What was your understanding of him before you read this novel, and how did your understanding change, if it all? Did you know about his philanthropy and role in the formation of the modern library system? If you had the fortune of Carnegie, what cause would you devote yourself to?

12. While the world of *Carnegie's Maid* is grounded in facts, Clara Kelley herself is a fictional character, although her immigrant experience and her lady's maid role are founded upon historical research. Would the story be different for you if Clara were entirely nonfiction?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

What inspired you to write *Carnegie's Maid*? Did something particular draw you to Andrew Carnegie's story?

Growing up, I was surrounded by Irish grandmothers and great-aunts who told tales of our immigrant ancestors who, after enduring arduous journeys to this country and working in mills, mines, and as domestics, elevated themselves through the first Carnegie Library in Pittsburgh, among other institutions. Utilizing those resources, they spurred on their families to become educated professionals. So, you can imagine that Andrew Carnegie has always been a topic of conversation and reverence in my family (despite some of the negative publicity he generated), and I was always insatiably curious about him and his drive to become the world's first philanthropist. *Carnegie's Maid* was born from that curiosity.

Andrew Carnegie is a well-known historical figure who many may feel they already know. What challenges did you face when writing Carnegie as a more well-rounded character? What preconceptions did you have to overcome?

Many people are familiar with Andrew Carnegie's reputation as a ruthless businessman, especially the role he may have played in the Homestead Strike of 1892, which grew out of a conflict between the Carnegie Steel Company and the iron and steel workers' union. And while that reputation is certainly deserved and I do delve into the questionable practices behind the astonishing growth of his businesses—his insider trading in particular—I hope I fleshed out other aspects of

the man behind the icon: his relationship with his mother and brother, the singular nature of his intellect and ascent, the kindnesses of which he could be capable, and, importantly for my story, the sense of obligation he developed to immigrants less fortunate than himself.

Carnegie's Maid relies on an extensive amount of research. What does your research process look like? What usually comes first, your idea for the story or your research of a topic?

Because I write historical fiction that aims to uncover hidden women's stories, the idea for my story and the research process generally occur simultaneously. As I'm reading about a particular time period I find intriguing, I will come across an event, and I'll wonder about the women, who are rarely mentioned in historical accounts. What were they doing at the time? What was their perspective of or involvement in the event? As I envision the women, a story will reveal itself to me. Then I really dig into the research—original source material when I can get it—excavating whatever details are necessary from the past to craft the world and the women. While I began _Carnegie's Maid_ with a preexisting interest in Andrew Carnegie, the story did not begin to form until I began the research and saw Clara's story there, and then my usual process took hold.

Clara's story is, at its core, a tale of a young female immigrant forging a path for herself in America. How did you bring to life Clara's immigration story? What experiences did you draw on?

Well, as I mentioned, I grew up with plentiful family tales—tall and otherwise—about my immigrant heritage upon which I could draw. For example, Clara's story of mistaken identity—when she steps off the boat from Ireland to hear her name being called from the docks for a position that belongs to _another_ Clara Kelley—supposedly happened to one of my ancestors. And my great-aunts shared stories about their mothers and aunts who'd served as maids in the "big houses,"

so that served as an incredible, authentic resource. But when the personal familial well ran dry, or when I needed more details, context, and information to really enliven the narrative, I relied on accounts of other immigrants who endured similar things. The newspaper ads of immigrants searching for family members, who'd traveled ahead of them and then became lost, were particularly moving. I was also amazingly fortunate to have nearby the Frick Pittsburgh, which is a perfectly preserved late nineteenth-century house museum of Andrew Carnegie's colleague Henry Clay Frick. The curators there not only gave me access to material, but also gave me personal tours of the parts of the house that maids would have used, which allowed me to envision the life of a lady's maid in great detail.

Which character did you connect with more, Carnegie or Clara? Which was the greater challenge to write?

I definitely connected more with Clara, particularly because I felt like I knew women like her. Those grandmothers and great-aunts that I've mentioned were all intelligent and outside-the-box thinkers, determined to advance themselves and their families by any means necessary. Scrappy, just like Clara. Carnegie was more of a challenge because I'd always thought of him in his guise as an older, esteemed industrialist, not as a young man. I enjoyed digging his younger self out of the past and trying to discover what made him into the unique person he was—finding the man instead of the myth.

How would you describe Carnegie and Clara's relationship?

I envisioned Clara as a female version of Andrew, in some ways. Like Andrew, she is a very bright but uneducated immigrant who is searching for ways to climb above her allocated station at a particular moment in American history when such ascent is possible. This similarity attracts them to each other, but ultimately, it is the differences in their drives—avarice and greed for its own sake (and his mother and

brother) motivates him as a young man, while she is propelled by her duty toward the family she left behind in Ireland—that creates a wedge between them.

Andrew Carnegie has left behind a legacy of philanthropy and a devotion to libraries and other causes that aim to help the underprivileged and marginalized. If you had the means of Carnegie, what causes would you support?

That's a tough question, because there are so many worthy causes, so many needy people. But, if I had Carnegie's means, I would certainly support two of his primary causes: (1) libraries and education, particularly for the underprivileged, and (2) the bolstering of immigrants to this country. These two core beliefs underpin the formation of our country and the elevation of my own family. After that, I'd likely follow Bill and Melinda Gates's example. I like their philanthropic philosophy of seeing equal value in all lives and making the broadest possible impact in improving everyone's basic quality of life.