Students: Here are my responses to common questions about my work. Feel free to use them in a project. Best regards, Liza Mundy

Liza Mundy Q and A

Writing process:

1. What advice would you give to aspiring writers?

Persist. Rewrite. Then rewrite again. Don't give up. Tolerate the bad writing because it will get you to the good writing. Very few authors write perfectly in a first draft, Jack Kerouac notwithstanding. When you don't feel like you are writing, take heart in the fact that, at the very least, you are typing. Typing is a start. Stay seated. It gets better.

2. What do you like about writing? What do you not like?

I love every part of the process. I love the sense of discovery that comes with researching and reporting. For Code Girls, I spent months at the National Archives, and each new cart they wheeled out, lined with gray boxes stuffed full of old rosters and records, was like Christmas Day. I loved talking to the women interviewed for this book, learning about what it was like to be a girl in America in the 1920s. I visited a lot of assisted living facilities and ate a lot of tuna fish salad and cottage cheese. I loved these conversations. The women had so many memories and powerful experiences. I also enjoyed trying to understand the mechanics of code-breaking and trying to explain it for a general audience of readers. Believe it or not, I also enjoy being edited, at least by a great editor like the excellent and supportive Paul Whitlatch (my editor at Hachette) and I enjoy revising. I appreciate being fact-checked and copy-edited. The only part I loathe—and yet it's so necessary—is going through the manuscript with a fine-toothed comb, hunting for my own misapprehensions or mistakes. I take heart from the fact that the great cook and cookbook author, Julia Child, also talked about how she hated the proofreading part, and how she always, inevitably, in reviewing a new edition of her work, found that she had gotten something wrong in a recipe, putting 1 tablespoon of almond extract when it should have been 1 teaspoon, etc. That is the harrowing part, yet it must be done.

3. What were your favorite books growing up / which books influenced your writing?

Growing up, honestly, I would read anything at hand—Reader's Digest, Betsy-Tacy, Nancy Drew, my brother's Boy's Life, Victoria Holt, "Can This Marriage Be Saved," The Exorcist, hardback military histories stuck in my parents' bookshelf, Peck's Bad Boy which I found in my grandparents' basement, you name it. Then in high school, we had such great English classes: James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, Ray Bradbury, Shakespeare, Doris Lessing, Annie Dillard, Henry

James, Edith Wharton, Faulkner, it was just a cornucopia of wonderful literature. I couldn't believe I got to read for homework. But I distinctly remember going to the public library, it must have been in the 1970s, and asking for biographies of famous women. I suppose that I was looking for inspiration and role models, without even knowing it. Believe it or not, the only thing the public library offered—at that time—was biographies of the wives of Henry VIII. And we know how things turned out for them: not well. I went ahead and read them. Fortunately, we've come a long way since then in terms of non-fiction that recognizes women's contributions to history. Not far enough, but still, a long way.

4. Who are writers you like?

I read a lot of thrillers and spy and crime novels. I just finished LeCarre's Legacy of Spies, and Michael Connelly's The Late Shift. I read every Laura Lippman and Louise Penny, and a lot of Scandinavian thrillers. But I read a lot of historical non-fiction, which we have such a wonderful abundance of, a great deal of it now being written by women. I worship at the altar of Stacy Schiff, Candice Millard, Dava Sobel. Beth Macy. David McCullough. Walter Isaacson. I also have an addiction to the British naval seafaring novels of Patrick O'Brian. They came in strangely handy when writing about the US Navy.

5. Do you have a designated writing space? What is your writing process?

My writing process is that I sit down at my desk and start to write. I try not to get up for several hours. I write in the smallest bedroom of our house, converted into an office. But I have to confess, I had so much research material for this book, that it spilled over into both of my children's bedrooms. The only consolation of being an empty-nester was that I could inhabit their space. They were away in college, and I would clean up before they came back, so fortunately they never knew how many books and papers were stacked in their rooms. My son still has not asked why there is a huge wall map of the world on a wall of his room, with many Pacific islands circled. I forgot to take it down.

6. How do you come up with ideas for projects?

Desperately searching and asking people, reading things, going down rabbit holes, rejecting a lot of ideas before I find a good one. I wish there was some secret. If there is, I'd like to know it. I love federal historians who work for the U.S. government; they know so much about their agencies and are so generous about sharing their knowledge.

7. What are you working on now?

Coming up with that next idea. I am venturing down a lot of avenues and rabbit holes. Maybe there will be a rabbit down there.

8. What interested you about writing (subject matter of the book)?

My gosh, everything. The women. Their lives, growing up. Why they went to college at a time when only 4 percent of American women did so. What were their aspirations. What was the code-breaking course like. Their time in Washington. What Washington was like. The work they did. The opportunity to contribute to the body of literature on what remains the worst conflict the globe has ever seen, and try to get this cohort of redoubtable women some long-overdue credit for their contribution.

Code Girls Specific Questions:

1. How did you first find out about the Code Girls?

I read a declassified NSA history of Venona, the code-breaking project that deciphered Soviet messages and led to the exposure of spies. This history, written by an NSA historian named Lou Benson, mentioned that a lot of the code-breakers who worked on Venona, both during the war and for decades afterward, were women, and that a lot of the women were former schoolteachers. Unusual for historians, Lou thought to interview those women about how they were recruited. The stories were amazing. Then I went and talked to Betsy Smoot, a current NSA historian, and Jennifer Wilcox, a curator at the Cryptology Museum, and they sketched out how the Venona women were part of a much, much larger cohort of women recruited during the war, working on Japanese and German systems. I couldn't believe the story had not already been told. And yet, it had not.

2. How difficult was it to locate and interview the surviving Code Girls? Were any reluctant to discuss this part of their lives?

I worried about this, starting out—I knew that the women would be in their early 90s, if I could find them. I consulted a lot of rosters and put out a lot of letters and calls. It was hard because during the war, many women joined under their maiden names, and their names had changed since then, sometimes more than once. So locating their contact information based on rosters from the 1940s was a challenge, but in some cases, doable. The NSA also put me in touch with some families who had made inquiries about what their mothers did, and that email chain led me to a living codebreaker, Dot Braden Bruce. I also consulted alumnae records from colleges, some of whom, like Goucher and Wellesley, have begun to collect this information and recover this history. But some of it was happenstance. One friend went to visit her mother at an assisted living facility in Maine, of all places, and came back exclaiming that she had found not just one code-breaker, but three. And she did!

And you're right, I did sometimes have to convince the women that after nearly 75 years, it is okay to talk. Sometimes it took some cajoling. When I was telling Dot Braden Bruce that it's okay to talk, she hesitated, but then mused; "Well, what are they going to do to me at my age? Send me to prison?" I told her that if they did, it would probably be a nice prison, and she laughed. My sense was that they were still very respectful of their vow of secrecy—now lifted— but after all this time of having their work ignored, they were also eager to get some credit and have their contribution recognized. Understandably so.

3. What was one of the most surprising things you learned in your research?

The extent of the women's contributions, even going back to the period before the war began. These women were not secretaries or assistants or ancillaries. They made major, major contributions to the course of the war and to the development of computers, code-breaking, and cybersecurity. And the extent to which history had ignored them. It made me angry.

4. How did family members you spoke to react to the revelation that their mother/grandmother was involved in the program?

With fascination and pride. In some cases, the family had been begging for years, asking their mothers and grandmothers to talk about their work. People are so proud to have a codebreaker in their family. They have so much respect for these women.

5. How difficult, or not, was it for the women to return to their lives after the war?

Difficult, in virtually every case. In some cases, quite traumatic. Some of the women were very traumatized by the stress of the work, the knowledge of the lives they could not save even as they did save so many. And their new lives were such a contrast to their old ones: suddenly they were married (usually) and pregnant (usually), scrambling for housing, living isolated in apartments and post-war houses, cut off from their old lives and their valuable work. (The same was true, of course, of returning men.) This is why one group of female code-breakers started a round-robin letter; to counter their isolation and stay in touch and preserve their friendship, even though, in their letters to one another, they could not talk about the work they did or even allude to it.

6. Why do you think the contributions the code girls made to ending the war remained such a secret for so long?

Because they were so good about keeping the secret, and because for decades—centuries—people just assumed that any work a woman did must be low-level and secretarial and not important. This is the great irony: precisely because of this stereotype about women workers, because of the general belief that their work is often rote and low-level, it was very easy for women codebreakers to fend off inquiry during the war. But alas, the stigma persisted afterward. It's astonishing how their work is neglected in so many codebreaking histories, which often state, sometimes in an actual parenthetical: "Oh, by the way, most of this work was done by women." And then the books press on and write about only the men. It's not that the women were more important. But they were certainly as important as the men. And there were more women than men doing the work.