

Inspired by the incredible true story of courage and resistance.



THE
VENTRILOQUISTS

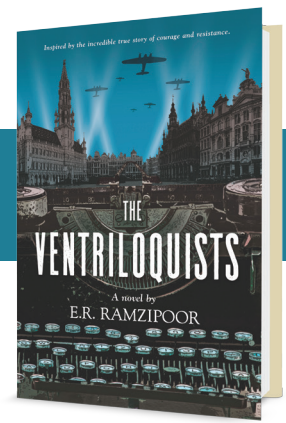
A novel by
E.R. RAMZIPOOR



**BOOK CLUB
KIT**

Discussion Guide

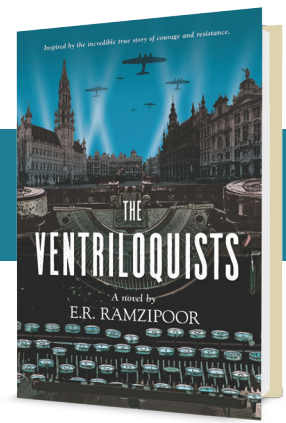
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION



1. ***The Ventriloquists*** opens with a quote: “All art is propaganda.” How does the book play with the relationship between art and propaganda? Gruppenführer August Wolff is the head of the Department of Perception Management. His job is to produce and regulate propaganda in Nazi territories. Contrast his approach to that of Marc Aubrion, the artist who leads the *Faux Soir* endeavor. Does Wolff create art? Does Aubrion create propaganda?
2. In telling the story, Helene emphasizes the role of ordinary people in forging the resistance. Almost none of Gamin’s heroes are the traditional figures we associate with World War II. Do you think these people were as larger-than-life as Gamin believes? Or does Gamin build them up in her imagination? Does the “ordinary hero” have parallels today?
3. This book is based on a true story. Many of the capers in ***The Ventriloquists*** actually happened. Which parts do you think were real? Now look at the author’s note in the back of the book to see if you were right! Does anything surprise you?
4. ***The Ventriloquists*** is about how information, both real and fake, can shape attitudes, beliefs and ideals. It took monumental effort and resources to publish *Faux Soir*. Today *Faux Soir* could be posted on the internet in seconds. Do you think the availability of real and fake information online has made that information more powerful, or less so? If *Faux Soir* had been posted online instead of handed out in the streets, would it have had the same impact?
5. The characters are at their best when they embrace the childish and the absurd. After all, they risk their lives for a joke. What are your favorite moments of absurdity from the book? In your life and in the book, how does humor alleviate tragedy? Can one exist without the other?

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A CONVERSATION WITH E.R. RAMZIPOOR



Your debut novel, *The Ventriloquists* is set in Belgium during the Second World War. What is it about?

When the Nazis invaded, they took Belgium's voice, burning books, murdering writers and turning honest newspapers into hollow propaganda mouthpieces. Marc Aubrion of the dissident *Front de l'Indépendance* writes childish scathing reviews of pro-Nazi plays and calls it resistance. But August Wolff, the Nazi official in charge of the Ministry of Perception Management, has grander plans for Aubrion and presses him and his colleagues into service for the Germans. They are an uninspiring lot: a talentless prostitute and smuggler, who must hide her feelings for another woman; a laconic man with a club foot, whose business is sabotaging the reputations of the elite; and a professor haunted by a failed mission he undertook at Auschwitz.

Wolff's plan is for Aubrion to co-opt the resistance newspaper *La Libre Belgique* and produce a version that uses the voice of the resistance to paint the Allies as monsters. If the literary ventriloquists take the assignment, they will be granted immunity. If they refuse, they will be shot.

Wolff's assignment sparks something brilliant: on November 11 Aubrion will release a fake version of the Nazi propaganda mouthpiece *Le Soir*. "*Faux*" *Soir* will mock the Reich, poke fun at Hitler and Stalin, and play on the atrocities that have terrified the Belgian people since the start of the war. Twenty-five years after the German forces were driven back, Aubrion will remind the people of Belgium it can be done again.

The ventriloquists have agreed to die for a joke, and they have only eighteen days to tell it. Their allies are few and unlikely: a homosexual Jew and master of linguistic ventriloquy, whose life was spared by the Germans in exchange for his loyalty; a mysterious judge beginning to discover her own sexual identity; and a young orphan-turned-arsonist from whose perspective the story is told. This sad lot does not expect everything to go well, nor does it need to—it needs to go wrong in *just* the right way.

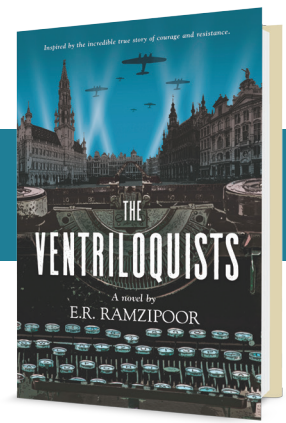
Until now, the literary canon has been conspicuously silent on how everyday resistance fighters contributed to the Allied victory in World War II. *The Ventriloquists* helps to fill this gap in the public imagination by inviting the reader on a fast-paced, high-stakes World War II caper with a diverse cast.

The novel is based on true events. How did you first discover the story that became the basis for your book?

I discovered this story while working on my undergrad thesis at UC Berkeley, which was on how resistance movements use underground literature to organize and mobilize. While reading a document prepared by the US War Office after World War II, I saw a line about a group of Belgian writers who wrote a fake newspaper and were able

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to produce 60,000 copies before the Nazis discovered what they were doing. I did some more digging and uncovered a fascinating but forgotten story.

Marc Aubrion, one of the central characters, was a real person. Who was he?

Marc Aubrion was a journalist who wrote and edited articles for the resistance newspaper *La Libre Belgique*. When the *Front de l'Indépendance* wanted to stage an act of resistance on Armistice Day 1943, Aubrion came up with a mad idea: to create a fake version of the Nazi propaganda newspaper *Le Soir*. He began work on October 19 and wrote most of the paper in what his friends called “an excited fury.”

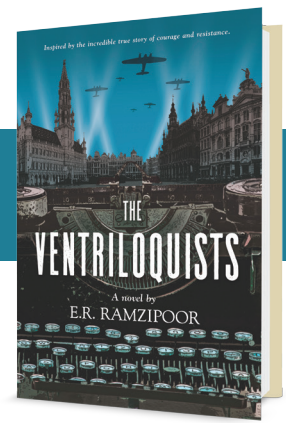
Are the other “Ventriloquists” based on real-life people or did you create them for this fictional reimaging?

Because the operation unfolded in secrecy, we know very little about Aubrion or his colleagues. However, we do have some broad character sketches. Marc Aubrion himself was a real person: a relatively minor journalist who wrote and edited articles for the resistance newspaper *La Libre Belgique*. He came up with the idea for *Faux Soir* on October 19, 1943, and wrote most of it with fevered urgency. René Noël, director of the *Front de l'Indépendance* (FI) press department in Brabant and Hainaut, did indeed supervise the project. Aubrion and Noël were assisted by others such as Ferdinand Wellens, a flamboyant printer and businessman; Theo Mullier, a member of the FI who infiltrated the Nazi-controlled *Le Soir* factories; Andrée Grandjean, a barrister; Pierre Ballancourt and Julien Oorlinckx, both linotypists; and a “youth partisan” who has remained nameless—or, rather, who I named *Gamin*. Professor Victor Martin (I switched his first and last names for the book) was an actual sociologist who spied for the FI and wrote one of the first investigative reports on Auschwitz, but he did not participate in the *Faux Soir* caper.

Though David Spiegelman, Lada Tarcovich, and August Wolff are all fictional, they are echoes of real identities. It was rare, though not unheard of, that a Jewish or LGBT person would be granted immunity if they offered their services to the Reich. And prostitutes—queer or not—often operated smuggling rings with a variety of unlikely allies, from priests to farmers to children. The FI credited part of *Faux Soir*'s success to its network of smugglers, who made sure people all over the country, and then all over Europe, were able to secure a copy. Although Wolff the reluctant Nazi isn't based on anyone in particular, he is representative of a (sadly) common character: someone who could have given a voice to the oppressed, but didn't.

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A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR



This is a novel about a serious and dangerous act against the Nazis, and yet there is a good deal of levity in the narrative. Why did you take this uncommon approach?

The Ventriloquists is about a group of people who agree to die for a joke. While planning the novel, I spent a great deal of time thinking about the sorts of people who would put their lives on the line to make someone laugh. This isn't a story that we've heard before: typical World War II stories feature thrilling tales of sacrifice and heroism, but not much laughter. The architects of *Faux Soir* must have been incomparably brave, selfless and creative—but they also must have been funny. It was important for me to write a novel that was true to their mission to maintain the spirit of the newspaper itself.

Have you seen an original copy of the real *Faux Soir* that was created by these brave men and women in 1943?

For reasons I can't begin to imagine, the amazing story of *Faux Soir* has mostly been forgotten. But when the paper was first released, people cherished their copies and passed them down to their children. For that reason, multiple copies have survived.

Funny story—when I finished my senior thesis, I searched for a copy of the real *Faux Soir* and found that at least six still exist. I bought myself a copy from an antiques dealer as a graduation gift...the same day that my wife bought me a copy as a graduation gift, from the same antiques dealer.

Every other month, I see if I can find any other copies online. I now own three original copies of the paper.

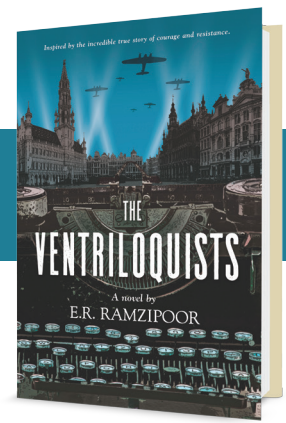
While we're not at war in the United States, journalists certainly find themselves under siege on a regular basis. Do you think *The Ventriloquists* has a contemporary message?

I do. First, whenever the Nazis invaded a country, one of the first things they did was to take over the country's major newspapers. They instantly turned these newspapers into German propaganda machines that refracted the truth through a Nazi lens. Many underground groups soon emerged and started producing their own fake versions of these Nazi newspapers...but these "fake" newspapers contained more accurate news than their "real" Nazi counterparts! It was as true in WWII as it is today: most everything we read is propaganda for someone.

Second, there's very little difference between the fake content people consumed during World War II and the fake content of today. The only difference is scale: today's bots and machine-learning algorithms are able to mass-produce fake content in a way that would have awed Marc Aubrion. But overall, fake content was pervasive then and

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is pervasive now. Research firm Gartner predicts that by 2022, people will see more fake content than real content online.

Third, resistance to oppression comes in myriad forms and is often more colorful and creative than we might expect. Journalists, writers, librarians, academics and readers... Each of these thinkers has a part to play in the fight against ignorance. That was true during WWII and it's true now.

Why is satire so important, during good times, but particularly during bad?

About a year ago, I came across a news story that drove home this novel's relevance: towns across Germany and Sweden are fighting a resurgence of Nazism by making fun of Nazis. This strategy has a long, storied lineage. During World War II, the Polish underground carried out a campaign called Operation N that demoralized the Nazis by making fun of them and satirizing their activities on a mass scale. In Syria's Idlib province, members of the satirical radio station Radio Fresh incur great personal risk by making fun of the Assad regime. In China, an underground network has emerged that uses coded language to stand up to ignorance and bigotry.

In the right hands, satire is an invaluable tool that illuminates uncomfortable truths. When speaking truth to power, it helps if the truth is funny.