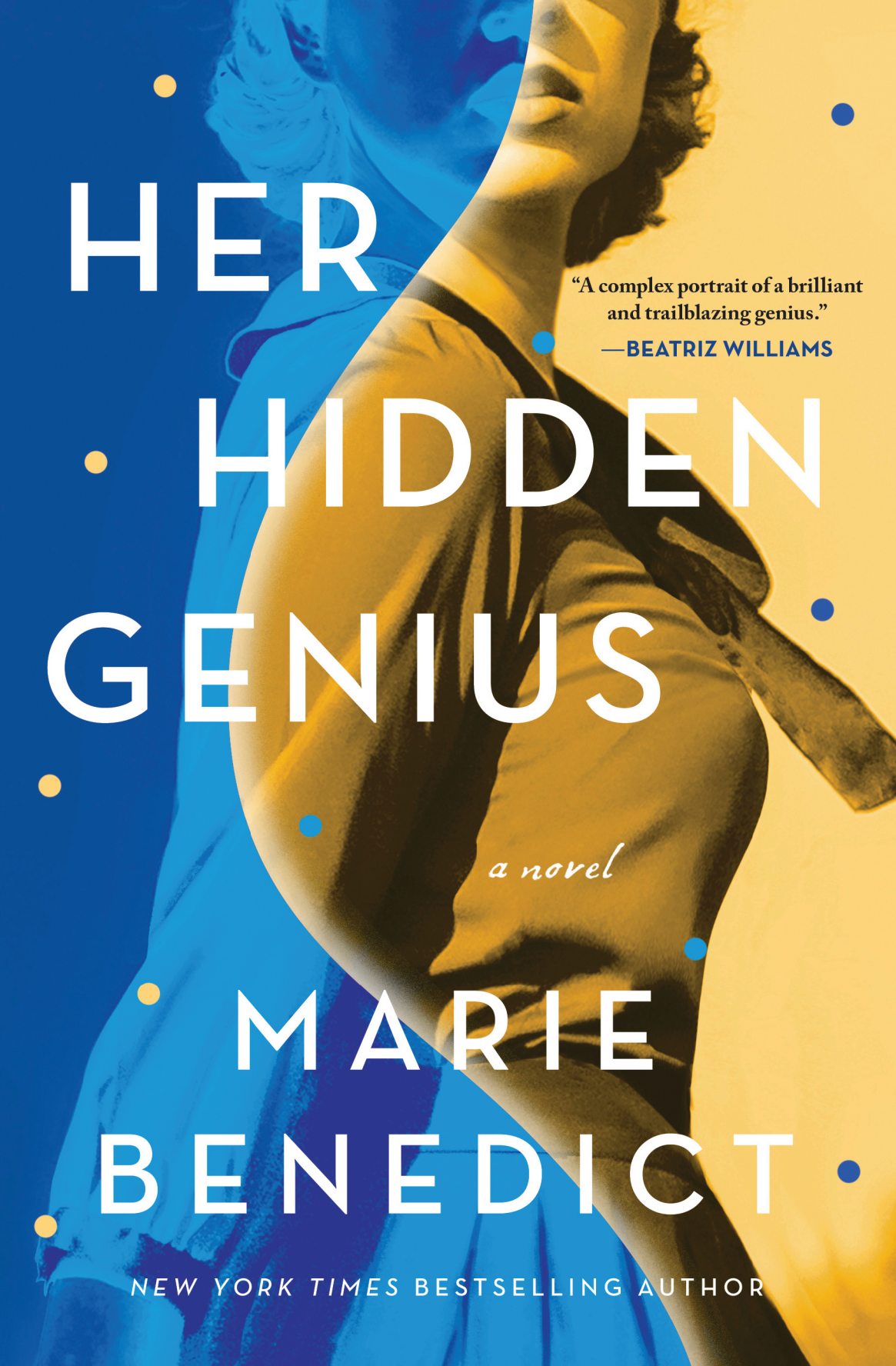
HER HIDDEN GENIUS
"A complex portrait of a brilliant and trailblazing genius."
—BEATRIZ WILLIAMS
a novel
MARIE BENEDICT
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Before reading *Her Hidden Genius*, had you heard of Rosalind Franklin? What, if anything, did you know about the history of DNA, and how did the book affect your understanding of that history?

2. Compare Rosalind's experiences in France to her experiences in England. What was the biggest difference you noticed between each culture's expectations for scientists and women?

3. Rosalind asserts early on that marriage and science are not meant to coexist for working women. Do you think that idea is a product of her time period, or her personality? Does she reevaluate it throughout the book, and if so, how?

4. How does Rosalind's Jewish identity shape her behavior and priorities throughout the book? How are she and her family still contending with the events of World War II?

5. What did you think of Rosalind's approach to lab safety? How do you think things have changed for modern scientists?

6. Jacques pushes Rosalind to be honest with their colleagues about the nature of their relationship. Why does she resist? How would you feel in her position?

7. Watson and Crick are not the first colleagues to use Rosalind's work without her permission. Compare Wilkins's use of Rosalind's preliminary data at the Cavendish conference to Watson and Crick's acceptance of credit for discovering the structure of DNA. How much do you think Rosalind knew or understood about the data and images that Watson and Crick used without her knowledge or permission? How does this affect her?

8. Collaboration in science is crucial for the most robust discoveries, so how should collaborative projects proceed in a fair fashion, and how should credit be assigned for those discoveries? Do you think the so-called gentleman's agreements between heads of institutions that were meant to govern areas of focus in Rosalind's time still exist today, or have they been replaced by more definitive guidance and contracts? Are there still people like Rosalind whose contributions are ignored or attributed to others?

9. What do you think is Rosalind Franklin's greatest legacy? Does the author's note make you think more expansively—or differently—about Rosalind's legacy? Any other takeaways?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

How did you first hear of Rosalind Franklin and decide to tell her story?

After I started writing historical fiction about the often unknown but key women of the past, my friends and family became very attuned to noticing these women when they come across them in the course of their own lives. In the case of Rosalind Franklin, while I'd had a very high level awareness of her story and incredible discoveries for some time, it was only when a dear physician friend of mine read about her contributions and sacrifices in a medical book and really advocated that I do a deep dive into research on Rosalind that I took a close look. I am so grateful to my friend, because the life and legacy of Rosalind Franklin is crucial and captivating on so many levels, some of which I didn't appreciate until I was already writing the novel.

Did your research process differ for Rosalind's scientific and home lives? How do you develop a full understanding of someone like Rosalind, whose life was so dominated by work? And how does historical research compare to scientific research?

In some ways, the research process for *Her Hidden Genius* was similar to the one I undertake for all the women I write about. I gather as much original source material about the woman as I can and then supplement it with whatever robust, credible secondary material I find, then assemble an understanding of the macro and micro historical aspects and timelines of the woman's world, from political, social, and

cultural developments to details such as fashion and food in order to create a realistic world for her to inhabit. Researching Rosalind's story did differ in that, in addition to the research I detailed above, I had to spend an enormous amount of time not only understanding DNA itself but also comprehending the developments in genetics from a historical perspective. As I was reading about the origins of genetic understanding and its progress up until Rosalind's era, I encountered many brilliant scientists whose lives were devoted to the solving of these critical questions, and their struggles and passion for the work helped me understand the professional Rosalind in part, as did accounts by people who knew her well, like Anne Sayre, who knew her both professionally and personally. The insights I had about the personal Rosalind came from family memoirs like Jenifer Glynn's *My Sister Rosalind Franklin*, the terrific biography *Rosalind Franklin: The Dark Lady of DNA* by Brenda Maddox, Anne Sayre's wonderful book *Rosalind Franklin and DNA*, and the astonishing collection of Sayre's research that she deposited in the American Society for Microbiology's archives, which included original letters from and to Rosalind, interviews with most of the people involved in her scientific career, and letters with Rosalind's family members after her death. These latter, original source materials were invaluable in bringing Rosalind alive for me, and the experience of working with letters written in her own hand was unbelievably moving.

The scientific communities in France and England are starkly different. Where do you think these differences came from?

While I cannot speak for all French and English scientific communities, certainly the institutions with which Rosalind was familiar were quite distinct, primarily in terms of the social interactions and tone of the laboratories. Rosalind found the French *labo* a marvelous mix of camaraderie, support, and intellectual stimulation—both about science and the world—regardless of her gender. Whether this was a function of a unique atmosphere created by its heads Jacques Mering and Marcel

Mathieu or simply the sort of intellectual environment fostered in Paris at that time, as Brenda Maddox suggests in her book, it suited Rosalind perfectly. When Rosalind returned to England, she didn't find either the scientists (for the most part) or the institutes themselves to be particularly welcoming to women or especially cerebral, outside of the specific scientific investigations upon which they were working. In particular, she found this to be the case in her unit at King's College, much to her disappointment, and she struggled to find a place to belong.

What was the most surprising thing you learned about Rosalind Franklin?

While Rosalind was fully engaged in her scientific research and musings, it didn't encompass the whole of her life by any means—no matter the amount of time she actually spent working or the vast breadth of her contributions. In addition to being a wonderful, thoughtful friend who invested in her relationships, she was a dedicated, skilled mountain climber. She would plan elaborate travels for her holidays, jaunts that typically encompassed significant hiking and strenuous climbs. Once I learned this fact about Rosalind, it opened up another level of understanding about her, and I came to view her time immersed in the mountains and their challenges as another facet of her appreciation for the natural, scientific world. Almost like a sort of personal spirituality.

When writing historical fiction, many of the choices you'd normally make for your characters are already decided. How do you approach character growth and narrative arcs without changing the historical facts?

Although I absolutely write fiction and the women at the center of my novels are my versions of real-life women, I do try to stay as close to the historical facts as we know them in crafting my stories. I usually find room to shape their characters and narratives when we *don't* know the definitive facts, in the shadows of history—and there

are *always* gray areas where we don't know exactly what transpired or how the women felt about the events. There, I use a mix of the women's characters as I've come to know them through my research and the sort of logical extrapolation I developed from my years as a lawyer. For example, in *Her Hidden Genius*, we don't know precisely what Rosalind understood about the nature of Watson and Crick's use of her research and data in their ultimately famous model building of DNA, and there, I used my own sense of Rosalind and the arc of her story to fill in the gaps with fiction.

Much of *Her Hidden Genius* centers on institutional competition. How do you think scientific inquiry is impacted by a competitive spirit? Do you consider yourself competitive?

In reviewing the scientific developments around genetics, I came to understand how critical it can be for scientists to be apprised of the work that's been undertaken before them (so often if work isn't shared, it can be overlooked, only to be rediscovered and its importance understood decades later, or even longer) and the ongoing investigations that relate to their subject. Only by comparing and studying all these projects can science advance. That said, as vying for institutional funding comes into play and recognition for being "first" grows in importance, scientists and their establishments may well be inclined to be secretive around their discoveries as competition grows—an unfortunate fact in a field that really relies on sharing of information. In terms of my own competitiveness, I have very high expectations of myself, although I wouldn't consider myself drawn to a traditionally understood desire to "win," and in this way, I could identify with Rosalind, who was always her own harshest critic and held herself to sometimes impossibly high standards.

These days, many textbooks discuss Franklin's contributions alongside those of Watson and Crick, though during their lifetimes, she was not given the credit she deserved. What benefit do we gain from rediscovering and giving credit to figures like her, even if they will never see that recognition?

With all my novels, I aspire to offer a lens through which readers can look at the past and see the women and the scope of their legacy. It is my hope that they will then take the lens and see not only our past differently but also our present and our future—to identify and celebrate the historical women where they've been hiding in plain sight and then to ensure that we do the same for the women of today and tomorrow. While it would have been wonderful to honor Rosalind Franklin and give her the accolades she deserved (like the Nobel Prize) in her lifetime, it is critical that we excavate the important women of the past so we can free ourselves and our society from any lingering preconceptions about women, their abilities, and their capacity for contributions.