***Red Joan* by Jennie Rooney**

**The Reading Guide**

**Reading Group Questions**

‘Two scarlet high-heeled shoes are standing on her windowsill.’ From the moment Joan meets Sonya, her glamour is apparent, mainly through her clothes. They are even mentioned in the MI5 report of her last meeting with Leo. Did you find this an effective part of Sonya’s characterisation?

Did you spot the relationship between Leo and Sonya, or were you, like Joan convinced by their own explanations? If so, do you think this was something that the author was deliberately aiming to do?

‘Would there have been the same laxity in the security checks if a man with a science degree from Cambridge had been in the same role as you?’ Joan is an unlikely spy: quiet, passive entranced by Sonya’s glamour. Do you think Leo and Sonya identified and targeted her deliberately?

Do you think Leo ever truly loved Joan, whether he said it or not?

Who would you choose, Max or Leo?

 ‘But there isn’t, and so, very softly, she whispers a single word. “Hiroshima.”’ Do you think Joan is motivated by morals, as she claims, or by love?

‘How strange the human mind is, she thinks. Unknowable and unpredictable, its thoughts whizzing like electrons inside an atom. Invisible to the human eye.’ Whether you feel she was motivated by morals, or by love, do you think Joan is responsible for her actions, or do you think she was pushed into them by someone else (and if so, who)?

Is Joan a traitor, or a heroine?

‘When do I get to *choose* whether or not I want an atomic bomb spy for a mother?’ Do you agree with Nick’s argument here? Or do you believe that Joan is doing the right thing by insisting that she must tell the truth, at last?

Where do you think Joan’s story goes, from here? Where would you like it to go?

‘Oh dear. I thought I’d got away with it.’ The book’s epigraph shows just how real this novel might be. These days, we have Wikileaks, Bradley Manning and Edward Snowdon: very public whistleblowers, who share information with the world, not just other authorities to whom it might be relevant. Do you think this is more morally reprehensible than Joan’s actions, and if so, why? If not, why not?

**About the Book**

Joan's voice is almost a whisper. 'Nobody talked about what they did during the war. We all knew we weren't allowed to.' Joan Stanley has a secret. She is a loving mother, a doting grandmother, and leads a quiet, unremarkable life in the suburbs. Then one morning there is a knock on the door, and suddenly the past she has been so keen to hide for the last fifty years threatens to overturn her comfortable world. Cambridge University in 1937 is awash with ideas and idealists, yet unworldly Joan feels better suited to a science lecture and a cup of cocoa. But a chance meeting with the glamorous Russian-born Sonya and her charismatic cousin Leo blurs the edges of the things Joan thought she knew about the world, and about herself. In the post-War world of smoke and mirrors, allegiance is a slippery thing. Working in a government ministry with access to top-secret information, Joan is suddenly faced with the most difficult question of all: what price would you pay to remain true to what you believe? Would you betray your country, your family, even the man you love?

**Praise for *Red Joan***

"A meditation on the secrets we keep... *Red Joan*'s strength lies in the complex personal relationships that underpin the spying game... A powerfully-written exploration of the far-reaching consequences that even the smallest-seeming actions can have" (Kaite Welsh, *Literary Review*)

"A brilliant spy novel, with an unlikely culprit and a deft, involving plot...tense, beautifully pitched and very moving novel" (Eithne Farry, *Marie Claire*)

"A sensitive spy thriller. Finely detailed and resolutely sensitive. This excellent period novel still carries some considerable resonance in the age of Bradley Manning" (Andrzej Lukowski, *Metro*)

"If you loved William Boyd's *Restless*, you'll enjoy this" (Viv Groskop, *Red*)

"Compulsive reading... Rooney's approach is to make this a very personal story for Joan. There's love, loss, betrayal, friendship and secrets galore and it gives a believable insight on how one, normal person might be let to betray her country. The true mark of the story is that you find yourself thinking that you might have done exactly what Joan did in those circumstances" (*The Bookbag*)