

“Sara Ackerman never disappoints!”

—KATE QUINN, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Rose Code*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SARA ACKERMAN

Readers'  
Guide

The  
Codebreaker's  
Secret

*a novel*

Dear Reader,



I'm so excited to share with you the fifth novel in my Pearl Harbor Collection, *The Codebreaker's Secret*. The idea for this book came about while researching for *Radar Girls*. I always have my 'radar' up for interesting wartime stories, and when I happened upon a major incident in the Pacific that I had never heard of, my heart just about stopped. But as often is the case, this important event only involved men, as it was on the battle front. As much as I tried, I couldn't figure out how to create a story around this top secret operation. Nevertheless, I ordered a book to learn more, and in that book, when the author mentioned the codebreakers who played an instrumental role, a light bulb went off in my head. *A female codebreaker!* I always love that feeling when an idea comes and you just know that you're onto something.

The second part of the storyline arose from a desire to try my hand at a dual timeline novel. For some time now, I've been wanting to explore how the survivors were faring after the war, and how their often traumatic experiences shaped their lives. For the setting, I chose the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel because it sits on a stretch of coastline used by the military during the war to train and also to relax, and an idea began to form around the grand opening, which was only twenty years after the end of the war. It was feasible that at least one veteran would be there. Another reason for choosing the hotel is that it is one of my favorite places. As a young girl, when we would visit our grandparents on the Big Island, we'd always come down to the hotel for brunch and to swim and bodysurf at the gorgeous white sand beach. Later, I worked on the beach teaching stand up paddle board lessons and taking people out in the canoe to whale watch or swim with the manta rays at night.

I call this early phase of brainstorming my Big Idea Phase. During this time, I usually walk around in a daze and stare out the window for extended periods of time, take lots of beach or forest walks, and go on long drives. Daydreaming plays a huge role for me, as it allows my subconscious to sort things out. Trying to weave together several different stories into one cohesive novel can be daunting, but when it all comes together, it is so fun and so satisfying. I love how this one turned out, and I hope you will too.

Happy reading!

Aloha,  
Sara Ackerman





## WOMEN AND CODEBREAKING



Do you know the difference between a code and a cipher? This was one of the first things I had to wrap my head around in the early days of research for *The Codebreaker's Secret*. Here's what I found out: codes substitute arbitrary symbols (often numbers or letters) for the original message, and usually require a codebook to store the code. For example, code for Sara could be 7272, or as in the famous Japanese Wind codes during the war, East Wind Rain, when broadcasted over the radio meant there war was imminent with the US. A cipher, on the other hand, uses an algorithm (aka a series of instructions) to alter the original message. For example, it could be to shift each letter by four. So A would be E, M would be Q. While a code requires a codebook, a cipher requires a key – the instructions on how to transpose the message. Obviously, in war, codes and ciphers are extremely complicated and far more sophisticated, which makes the people that break them all the more impressive.

When beginning my research, I was surprised to find that by the end of WWII, the majority of our country's codebreaking force was female. And while many people are familiar with the German cipher machine, Enigma, and the work done at Bletchley Park, few know of JN-25, the Japanese naval code that we were so furiously trying to crack. This code was thought to be so foolproof (using over thirty thousand five-numeral groups along with what they call additives to complicate things), that the Japanese Navy had a false sense of security when sending messages. But we did crack it (mostly), and in cracking it, we turned the tides and not only defeated Japan, but shortened the war. Countless women had a hand in this.

While learning about JN-25, which was known as a super cipher, I was in complete awe of the mental acuity that these codebreakers possessed. Codes are usually broken not by one person, but by a whole team of people—a collective effort of memory and brainpower, and years of hard work that lays the groundwork for moments of inspiration. During the war, many of these teams were women.

Though in my novel, my main character Isabel is fictional, I drew inspiration from several real women codebreakers. Agnes Meyer Driscoll is known as an early pioneer of codebreakers.



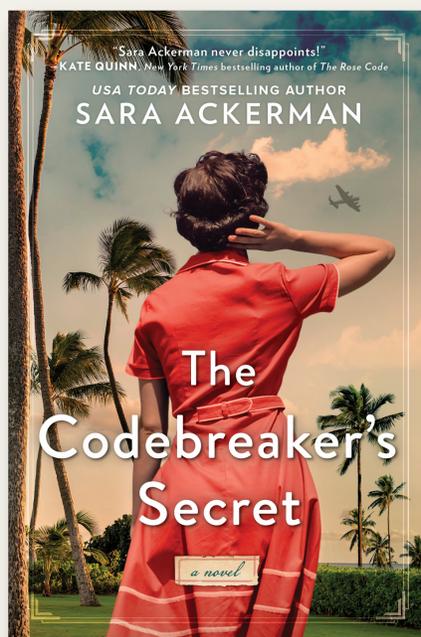
## WOMEN AND CODEBREAKING



She entered the navy during WWI and remained a leading cryptanalyst until 1949. Many of the men we know of for their work in Station Hypo at Pearl Harbor (Joe Rochefort & Edwin Layton among others), were trained by Agnes. Another groundbreaking codebreaker was Elizabeth Friedman, who had a long career with the government doing everything from monitoring international smuggling rings and bringing down the mob, to tracking the clandestine German network in South America during WWII. Also, in particular, I drew from the experience of Genevieve Grotjan, who worked for the Army's Signal Intelligence and played a key role in cracking the Japanese Cipher machine, code name Purple (which I call Magenta in my book).

We throw around the word “codebreaking” so casually, and yet it is such complex and multifaceted work. My main character, Isabel Cooper, is a compilation of many of these brilliant and hardworking women who were barely recognized for all of their contributions. That’s the thing about top secret work, no one knows that you’re doing it, but often times, it’s the most important work of all.

I hope I have done them justice.





## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



1. Were you aware of the critical role that women played in codebreaking during WWII? Not only were they codebreakers, but mechanics, radar plotters, pilots ferrying planes, flight medics and so much more. What role do you think you would have played had you been alive (or of working age) back then?
2. Had you heard about Operation Vengeance before reading this novel? What are your thoughts surrounding the decision the United States made about Admiral Yamamoto?
3. How do you think Isabel handled working with all the men in the Dungeon? Have you been in a similar situation where you were the only woman in a group of men, or somehow the odd person out?
4. So many servicemen faced survivors' guilt during the war. What were your thoughts on Matteo Russi and his fateful choice on the night of December 6? Was he in any way to blame?
5. What constitutes a traitor? During the war, If you were of German, Italian or Japanese ancestry, but living in the United States, where would your loyalties lie?
6. Matteo Russi developed a phobia of the water after his plane went down in China. Have you ever encountered anything like that in your own life? How did you deal with it? Do you think men and women handle trauma differently?
7. Men in positions of power have been known to flaunt that power. What are some other examples of men like Senator Fuchs? Anyone you know personally?
8. What were your thoughts on Matteo Russi's reasons for not wanting to get involved? Selfish? Noble? Scared? Something else entirely?
9. Were you hoping that Isabel and Russi would end up together at the end of the novel? Were you surprised by the ending?
10. Are you a fan of dual timeline novels? Why or why not? Did you find yourself more invested in one of the timelines in this story? Which character do you identify more with, Lu or Isabel?
11. Have you ever been to the Mauna Kea Beach Hotel? Or to Hawai'i? Did reading this novel make you want to visit?



# JN-25B CODE



<u>SECRET</u> R.I.P. 74-D		<u>ORIGINAL</u> 1 July 1941								
	001									
0	25751	04625	76730	80641	46476	78249	29212	17948	4	
1	80663	32414	26123	95202	24375	80324	49248	93580	7	
2	13648	79304	56253	16912	84214	43020	98512	24179	:	
3	08375	26559	97476	59075	72565	37675	14959	61290	:	
4	36875	86331	15307	20354	97835	64973	37290	95760	4	
5	74070	23621	86409	02279	13201	86171	07124	48373	7	
6	58963	72714	17063	59323	76451	46075	19606	83695	20	
7	93559	48051	72397	69752	32610	02431	23287	58590	37	
8	63908	50519	30479	73626	29589	35035	41187	12841	68	
9	84319	49678	50631	12630	65463	15036	39592	52643	96	
	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7		

Worksheet from station HYPO , July 1, 1941

Photo credit: StationHypo.com



## CRACK THE CODE!



*Can you crack the code below  
by following the clues?*

**6 8 2**

One number correct,  
in the correct place

**6 1 4**

One number is correct ,  
in the wrong place

**2 0 6**

2 numbers are correct,  
in the wrong place

**7 3 8**

Nothing is correct

**7 8 0**

1 number is correct,  
in the wrong place



Answer on the following page



CRACK THE CODE  
ANSWER



0

4

2

## ABOUT SARA ACKERMAN

Born and raised in Hawaii, SARA ACKERMAN studied journalism and earned graduate degrees in psychology and Chinese medicine. When she's not writing or teaching, you'll find her in the mountains or in the ocean.

[Ackermanbooks.com](http://Ackermanbooks.com)

