

BOOK CLUB To Go!

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society

By Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows

Introduction

The novel begins in the aftermath of World War II, in 1946, with the characters picking up the pieces after many exhausting years of war. Juliet Ashton is a London author who, during the war, wrote comedic sketches intended to lift people's spirits, and these articles have since been collected into a successful book. Left an orphan as a child, Juliet has two very dear friends: her editor, Sidney Stark, and his sister, Sophie Strachan, who now lives in Scotland. Chance brings Juliet a letter from Dawsey Adams, a farmer-turned-harbor worker and carpenter who lives on Guernsey. Juliet begins a correspondence with Dawsey, and Dawsey tells her about the Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society. It began during the war when Guernsey was occupied by the Germans. Dawsey's neighbor, Amelia Maugery, secretly kept a pig from the Germans, and she invited several friends to eat it with her. When the party ran late and the group members found that they had missed curfew, they tried to sneak home and were caught. Elizabeth McKenna immediately apologized to the officer who had detained them and told him that they were members of the Guernsey Literary Society and that their meeting had run late. The German officers seemed interested in attending future meetings of the Guernsey Literary Society, so Elizabeth set about forming a real one. Thus, the people who had been at the party, many of whom were not enthusiastic readers at the time, started reading and collecting books so that the Germans would believe their excuse for having been out past curfew if the German officers chose to attend meetings. No Germans attended at first (though a few did attend meetings over the years, none staying long), but soon the group members began reading books for their own sake. Eventually, reading and meeting with fellow readers to discuss literature became an important source of comfort and stability for them during these terrible years, and in the war's aftermath.

(NoveList.com)

About the Authors

Mary Ann Shaffer

Mary Ann Shaffer was born in 1934 in Martinsburg, West Virginia. An ardent book lover, she worked in libraries, bookstores, and publishing over the course of her life. In 1976, she visited Guernsey on a whim. She became stranded in the Guernsey airport when a thick fog descended and grounded all airplanes, and, left with little to do, she warmed herself under the hand dryer in the men's restroom and read the books in the airport bookstore. Many of these were locally published volumes about Guernsey and the Channel Islands' occupation by the Nazis during World War II. Twenty-five years later, Shaffer's enduring fascination with this period of the Channel Islands' history led her to set her first and only novel on Guernsey during and after World War II.

Shaffer had always wanted to write a novel worthy of publication, but she had great difficulty in completing her manuscripts. In the late 1990s, several of Shaffer's friends and family formed a writing group expressly for the purpose of encouraging her to write and complete a novel, and it was within this context that she began writing *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*. Shaffer chose to write her novel in an epistolary format because she felt that it would be easier to write than a third person narrative. A draft of *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* had been accepted for publication when Shaffer's health began to decline. Unable to finish the necessary editorial changes, she asked her niece, Annie Barrows, to assist her in completing the book. Shaffer died in February, 2008.

Annie Barrows

Annie Barrows was born in San Diego, California in 1962 and graduated from the University of California at Berkley with a degree in medieval history. She went on to become an editor at Chronicle Books in San Francisco. After getting an MFA in Creative Writing at Mills College, Barrows began writing adult books on subjects including palm reading, opera, and urban legends. In 2003, she decided that she would enjoy writing children's books. She is the author of the critically acclaimed Ivy and Bean series and *The Magic Half*.

(NoveList.com)

Author Interview

The following is from a 2008 Barnes & Noble interview with Annie Barrows. Her aunt, Mary Ann Shaffer, co-author of *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* died earlier in the year.

Q: Can you tell us, please, what prompted Mary Ann to write her first novel, *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*?

A. Barrows: Mary Ann was visiting England in 1976, and on a whim, she decided to fly down to Guernsey. Once she was there, a terrible fog rose from the sea and enveloped the island, and all ferry and plane service was shut down. Immured in the airport for seventy-two hours, Mary Ann passed the time warming herself under the hand-dryer in the men's restroom (the one in the women's restroom was broken) and reading all the books she could find in the airport bookstore.

Apparently, in 1976, the airport was the primary outlet for local publishing, and the subject of most of their books was the German Occupation of the island during the second World War. Mary Ann was always fascinated by accounts of the war, but this episode was unknown to her. She was riveted, there under the hand-dryer, gulping down book after book. When she was finally allowed to fly out, she brought half the contents of the airport bookstore in her suitcase.

Anyone who ever met Mary Ann knew that she was a writer-it wasn't just the tales she told, it was her relish in telling them. But writing was hard for her, and she never completed the manuscripts she started. Finally, in the late '90s, a writing group was formed for the express purpose of making Mary Ann write a book. The members were my mother, who doesn't even like to write, and two of Mary Ann's dearest friends. Each dutifully wrote something, until finally it was Mary Ann's turn. There was no way out of it- so she sat down and wrote the beginning of *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*.

Q: At what point in the writing process were you brought in to collaborate?

A. Barrows: In the summer of 2006, soon after *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* had been sold to Dial Press, Mary Ann's health began to fail. We kept hoping that she would feel better soon, but by the end of the summer, it was clear that the prospect of making the editorial changes on the book was going to be too much for her, and at that point, my cousin Liz called me to ask if I would take on the project. Of course, I said yes. Unlike plumbers or nurses or teachers, writers don't have very many opportunities to be useful to the people they love, and I was honored to be able to help my aunt.

Q: Much of the story takes place on the Channel Island of Guernsey. What inspired this unusual setting?

A. Barrows: The setting was a function of the history -- the Channel Islands were the only British land occupied by Germany during the Second World War, which makes their war story unique. Even apart from the war, Guernsey has its own interesting past as an amalgam of French and English culture. They manage to have British laws and French food, which was Voltaire's vision of a perfect society. Luckily, in addition to its history and culture, it's a beautiful island as well, with winding streets, lush fields, dramatic cliffs, and -- since the war -- a lot of empty German fortifications overgrown with wildflowers.

Q: Why did Mary Ann choose to tell her story in a series of letters?

A. Barrows: Mary Ann once told me that she chose the epistolary form because she thought it would be easier than narrative. Most writers would find that crazy, but I know what she meant: Writing in all those different voices was a blast. It's like playing 20 different roles, each with his or her own voltage and excitement. Furthermore, Mary Ann and I both adore reading other people's letters -- there's something a little bit forbidden and completely satisfying about it.

Q: You and Mary Ann share a background in books and publishing, and this novel has been described as "a celebration of the written word in all its guises." How do you view reading, and what role has literature played in your aunt's life and in your own?

A. Barrows: Mary Ann and I have this common background in libraries, bookstores, and publishing precisely because we really never did anything other than read in our entire lives. To be honest, working in any profession other than a book-related one would be impossible; books seem to be our only area of expertise.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like our readers to know about you, Mary Ann, or this wonderful novel?

A. Barrows: I would like everyone to know that I have actually made and consumed a Potato-Peel Pie. I want lots of credit for this, because it tasted like paste.

(litlovers.com)

Reviews

"I can't remember the last time I discovered a novel as smart and delightful as this one, a world so vivid that I kept forgetting this was a work of fiction populated with characters so utterly wonderful that I kept forgetting they weren't my actual friends and neighbors. Treat yourself to this book please—I can't recommend it highly enough."—Elizabeth Gilbert, author of *Eat, Pray, Love*

"A jewel...Poignant and keenly observed...A small masterpiece about love, war and the immeasurable sustenance to be found in good books and good friends."—*People*
"It's tempting to throw around terms like 'gem' when reading a book like this. But The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society is not precious...This is a book for firesides or long train rides. It's as charming and timeless as the novels for which its characters profess their love."—*San Francisco Chronicle Book Review*

"A book-lover's delight, an implicit and sometimes explicit paean to all things literary."—*Chicago Sun-Times*

(*Randomhouse.com*)

Further Reading

Island Magic by Elizabeth Goudge

The Book of Ebenezer Le Page by Gerald Basil Edwards

Fair and Tender Ladies by Lee Smith

84 Charing Cross Road by Helene Hanff

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Possible Discussion Questions

1. What was your experience reading a novel composed entirely of letters? Are there types of information or emotion that letters convey more successfully than other forms of expression? Would a novel in emails have different strengths and weaknesses?
2. Why is reading so important to the characters in this novel?
3. How does reading affect community?
4. What do their reading preferences say about some of the characters' personalities?
5. What makes Sidney and Sophie ideal friends for Juliet? What common ground do they share?
6. What about Dawsey's relationship with Charles Lamb?
7. In what ways does the Guernsey community change during the war?
8. What qualities does Elizabeth McKenna possess that make her the novel's heroine?
9. How does the novel's historical setting affect its approach to the theme of oppression?
10. How does the character of Juliet develop over the course of the novel?
11. Whose lives are changed the most by their membership in the society?

(NoveList.com & litlovers.com)