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More About This Book

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society

by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows

List Price: \$14.00

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About This Book

"I wonder how the book got to Guernsey? Perhaps there is some sort of secret homing instinct in books that brings them to their perfect readers."

January 1946: London is emerging from the shadow of the Second World War, and writer Juliet Ashton is looking for her next book subject. Who could imagine that she would find it in a letter from a man she's never met, a native of the island of Guernsey, who has come across her name written inside a book by Charles Lamb....

As Juliet and her new correspondent exchange letters, Juliet is drawn into the world of this man and his friends --- and what a wonderfully eccentric world it is. The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society --- born as a spur-of-the-moment alibi when its members were discovered breaking curfew by the Germans occupying their island --- boasts a charming, funny, deeply human cast of characters, from pig farmers to phrenologists, literature lovers all.

Juliet begins a remarkable correspondence with the society's members, learning about their island, their taste in books, and the impact the recent German occupation has had on their lives. Captivated by their stories, she sets sail for Guernsey, and what she finds will change her forever.

Written with warmth and humor as a series of letters, this novel is a celebration of the written word in all its guises, and of finding connection in the most surprising ways.

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Discussion Questions

1. What was it like to read a novel composed entirely of letters? What do letters offer that no other form of writing (not even emails) can convey?
2. What makes Sidney and Sophie ideal friends for Juliet? What common ground do they share? Who has been a similar advocate in your life?
3. Dawsey first wrote to Juliet because books, on Charles Lamb or otherwise, were so difficult to obtain on Guernsey in the aftermath of the war. What differences did you note between bookselling in the novel and bookselling in your world? What makes book lovers unique, across all generations?
4. What were your first impressions of Dawsey? How was he different from the other men Juliet had known?
5. Discuss the poets, novelists, biographers, and other writers who capture the hearts of the members of the Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society. What does a reader's taste in books say about his or her personality? Whose lives were changed the most by membership in the society?
6. Juliet occasionally receives mean-spirited correspondence from strangers, accusing both Elizabeth and Juliet of being immoral. What accounts for their judgmental ways?
7. In what ways were Juliet and Elizabeth kindred spirits? What did Elizabeth's spontaneous invention of the society, as well as her brave final act, say about her approach to life?
8. Numerous Guernsey residents give Juliet access to their private memories of the occupation. Which voices were most memorable for you? What was the effect of reading a variety of responses to a shared tragedy?
9. Kit and Juliet complete each other in many ways. What did they need from each other? What qualities make Juliet an unconventional, excellent mother?
10. How did Remy's presence enhance the lives of those on Guernsey? Through her survival, what recollections, hopes, and lessons also survived?
11. Juliet rejects marriage proposals from a man who is a stereotypical "great catch." How would you have handled Juliet's romantic entanglement? What truly makes someone a "great catch"?
12. What was the effect of reading a novel about an author's experiences with writing, editing, and getting published? Did this enhance the book's realism, though Juliet's experience is a bit different from that of debut novelist Mary Ann Shaffer and her niece, children's book author Annie Barrows?
13. What historical facts about life in England during World War II were you especially surprised to discover? What traits, such as remarkable stamina, are captured in a detail such as potato peel pie? In what ways does fiction provide a means for more fully understanding a non-fiction truth?
14. Which of the members of the Society is your favorite? Whose literary opinions are most like your own?
15. Do you agree with Isola that "reading good books ruins you for enjoying bad ones"?

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Critical Praise

"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*

"Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows have written a wondrous, delightful, poignant book— part Jane Austen, part history lesson. The letters in **The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society** aren't addressed to you, but they are meant for you. It's a book everyone should read. An absolute treasure."

— *Sarah Addison Allen, author of Garden Spells*

"Here's who will love this book: anyone who nods in profound agreement with the statement, "Reading keeps you from going gaga." **The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society** is a delight. Tart, insightful and fun."

— *Mary Doria Russell, author of The Sparrow, A Thread of Grace and Dreamers of the Day*

"Charming.... [Heroine] Juliet finds in the letters not just inspiration for her next work, but also for her life—as readers will."

— *Publishers Weekly*

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A novel setting

The Boston Globe

The other life of the only British territory occupied by the Germans in WWII

By Linda Matchan, Globe Staff | November 8, 2009

ST. PETER PORT, Guernsey - When you put your mind to it, there are plenty of ways to use a bunker on your property.

Extra storage. Wine cellars. Recording studios. These are some of the creative solutions devised by the resilient residents of Guernsey, a small, scenic island in the far reaches of the English Channel that found itself in Hitler's crosshairs in World War II. Guernsey was occupied by some 15,000 German troops between 1940 and 1945, and fortified so ferociously it was virtually impregnable. "You can't go more than 3 miles without seeing a bunker," said John O'Neill, a Guernsey photojournalist.

But the Germans left in a hurry when the war ended, abandoning their estimated 700 bunkers and everything in them. Since they're probably there for eternity, the people of Guernsey have made the best of them. O'Neill's rock band used to rehearse in one. Others have used them to grow mushrooms and store fish. "We've seen people use them for billiards," said Molly Bihet, author of several books on Guernsey's wartime history. "They're solid and they're warm because they're well insulated."

Until recently, the occupation has been a little-known footnote to World War II history. The harbor was bombed in 1940, killing 41 civilians. Half the population and most of the schoolchildren were evacuated, and all residents not born on the island were deported and interned in camps. Thousands of slave workers from German occupied territories were shipped to the island, starved, and worked - in many cases - to death.

But in the last year the island (population about 65,000) has been thrust from near-obscure into the international limelight with the surprise success of an American book, "The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society" (The Dial Press/Random House), by first-time novelist Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows. It was named one of the best books of 2008 by Time, The Washington Post, and other publications; the paperback has more than a million copies in print.

Written as a series of letters exchanged after the war, the novel tells intertwining stories of romance and the occupation. Because a subplot revolves around the eccentric members of the literary society, it's been a particular hit among book groups; nearly 57,000 of them from the United States entered a contest sponsored by the publisher to win a trip to Guernsey.

Yet here on the island, most people have barely taken notice. Not all the bookstores carry it. There's not a single potato peel pie souvenir to be found, not a slice of potato peel pie available in a restaurant. The book has barely made a dent in tourism: "Independent and group travelers have ventured to the island in search of potato peel heritage this year, but in the 100s rather than the 1000s," e-mailed Jason Moriarty, marketing manager for Guernsey's commerce division. But he's optimistic it will improve, and at least two local tour guides are working up Potato Peel Pie tours including locations described in the book.

But Guernsey folks are a self-contained, hunker-down sort, accustomed to and not offended by being overlooked, most famously by Winston Churchill, who as wartime prime minister decided the Channel Islands were of no strategic importance and thus would not be defended. The fact that the book inspired this reporter to cross the ocean and see it for myself struck people here as so remarkable that my visit was covered by the local newspaper.

What seems remarkable is that more tourists don't visit, given the extraordinary wealth of World War II history; the ease of getting here (an easy 45-minute flight from London); and the island's beauty and unrivaled quirkiness. At various times, Guernsey has been under the sovereignty of both France (30 miles east) and

Britain (125 miles north), and the French influence is still evident in much of the signage and in a local patois, Guernésiais, or Guernsey Norman French. It is a crown dependency of the United Kingdom, but self-governing; its ruling body has the delicious name of the States of Deliberation. It has its own Guernsey bank notes, which you do not want to be left with when you leave.

But for me, the German influence was the big story. Here, gun emplacements, bunkers, and batteries are as much a part of the landscape as the Guernsey cows. The grand Fort Hommet was built in the Victorian era to defend against the French, but the Germans cashed in on it and added on. (It's a hodgepodge, architecturally, but an impressive testament to their hubris.)

The German Military Underground Hospital is a grim concrete maze of tunnels built under a low hill in the Guernsey countryside. It was originally built to shelter German forces, but later briefly became a wartime hospital and ammunition dump. It took hundreds of so-called Todt slave workers from all over Europe more than three years to excavate it out of solid rock. Many on the island still recall the Todt workers scrounging for food, their feet wrapped in rags.

"We live with the war; we really can't escape from what happened," said Richard Heaume, a Guernseyman who in 1966 opened the German Occupation Museum, an outgrowth of his childhood hobby of collecting German bullets on his family farm. He went on to collect weapons, uniforms, gun batteries, mine-detecting equipment, band instruments (among the thousands of troops was a military band), and other relics of the occupation. The museum also owns and has restored two fortification sites: a casemate gun and a naval observation tower.

In most other ways, though, the island is much as the book described it, rural and bucolic, with a morning mist rolling over the pasture land. Horses share the narrow roads with cars, bicycles, and buses. Here and there, you'll find bouquets of flowers in wooden shadow box-like crates placed along country roads; deposit money in a can and help yourself. The harbor town of St. Peter Port rises from the sea on a series of terraces, "with a church on the top like a cake decoration," the novel observes. On a clear day, you can see Normandy.

Everywhere are scattered treasures: dramatic cliff walks; the 13th-century Castle Cornet, standing guard over the harbor; the grand Sausmarez Manor, which tour guide Annette Henry is convinced is the inspiration for Lord Tobias Penn-Piers's manor house in the novel. There are visual treasures such as The Little Chapel, barely big enough to hold two adults, based on the Grotto at Lourdes and covered completely in shards of Wedgwood china.

Though it barely figured into the novel, I was - to use a term in favor here - gobsmacked by one attraction: Victor Hugo's home, Hauteville House. Another obscure fact about Guernsey is that Hugo, who called Louis Napoleon a traitor, was exiled here for 15 years, from 1856 to 1870. The average person might not know about the house, since it's owned by the City of Paris. (You go to the Paris website to learn more about it, a circuitous route if ever there was one.)

Hugo was also an artist - both a painter and a remarkable designer. Every room is like a dramatic theater set, rich with luxurious tapestries, secret doors, symbolic engravings, and political messages such as "Exilium Vita Est" ("Life Is Exile") etched into the woodwork. Some of his paintings hang on the wall. His son Charles described the house as a "veritable three-story autograph, a poem in several rooms."

Hugo wrote standing up in a glassed-in attic chamber overlooking the harbor, castle, and sea, and facing his homeland; he finished "Les Misérables" here. The house is an attraction not to be missed.

The night before I left London, I had a chat with a Londoner about Guernsey. He thought it was odd, in the extreme, that I was going there: "We pretty much just ignore it," he said. "Why would you want to go there?"

I didn't have an answer then, but now I do. It's beautiful, of course, and relaxing. It offers a fresh perspective on a much-examined period of history, and how often does that happen when you visit Europe?

Indeed, I came away inspired. Should I ever stumble across a bunker in the course of daily life, I have all sorts of ideas about what to do with it.

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Mary Ann Shaffer



Books by this author at BookBrowse:
[The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society](#)

[Link to Author's Website](#)

Biography

Mary Ann Shaffer was born in Martinsburg, West Virginia, in 1934. Her career included libraries, bookstores, and publishing, but her life-long dream was to "write a book that someone would like enough to publish." Though she did not live to see it, this dream has been realized in *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*.

She became interested in Guernsey while visiting London in 1980. On a whim, she decided to fly to Guernsey but became stranded there when a thick fog descended and all boats and planes were forbidden to leave the island. As she waited for the fog to lift, warming herself by the heat of the hand-dryer in the men's restroom, she read all the books in the Guernsey airport bookstore, including *Jersey under the Jack-Boot*. Thus began her fascination with the German Occupation of the Channel Islands.

Many years later, when goaded by her book club to write a novel, Mary Ann naturally thought of Guernsey. She chose to write in the epistolary form because, "for some bizarre reason, I thought it would be easier." Several years of work yielded *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*, which was greeted with avid enthusiasm, first by her family, then by her writing group, and finally by publishers around the world.

Sadly, Mary Ann's health began to decline shortly thereafter, and she asked her niece, Annie Barrows (author of the *Ivy and Bean* series for children, as well as *The Magic Half*), to help her finish the book. Mary Ann died in February 2008, knowing that her novel was to be published in English and in translation in many languages throughout the world.

This biography was last updated on 07/25/2008.