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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society

by

Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows

(New York: A Dial Press Trade Paperback, 2009)

Author:

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 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 Plus]

Summary:

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 Plus]

Questions:

1. Why is reading so important to the characters in this novel?
2. How does reading affect community?
3. What do their reading preferences say about some of the characters' personalities?
4. What about Dawsey's relationship with Charles Lamb?
5. In what ways does the Guernsey community change during the war?
6. What qualities does Elizabeth McKenna possess that make her the novel's heroine?
7. How does the novel's historical setting affect its approach to the theme of oppression?
8. How does the character of Juliet develop over the course of the novel?

Further Reading:

Island Magic, Elizabeth Goudge. (1934)

This novel follows the lives of Rachel and Andre Du Froq and their five children living on Guernsey in the nineteenth century. They encounter a mysterious stranger who appears from the sea, and his presence changes their lives. This novel has been praised for its warm and detailed account of late nineteenth century life on Guernsey.

The Book of Ebenezer Le Page. Gerald Basil Edwards (1981)

This fictional autobiography follows the title character's long life on Guernsey. He remembers surviving the German Occupation as part of his history there and reminisces about island life as he has known it, touching on the secrets and family dramas of the people who live there.

Fair and Tender Ladies. Lee Smith (1988)

This novel tells the story of Ivy Rowe, from her young childhood to her old age, through letters that she writes to friends and family. The letters detail the impetuous Ivy's life with her eight brothers and sisters in the isolated culture of Virginia's Appalachian mountains in the early twentieth century.

The Uncommon Reader. Alan Bennett (2007)

Going in to the bookmobile to apologize for the disturbance created by one of her corgis, Queen Elizabeth II feels it would only be polite to check out a book. When she returns it, she checks out another . . . and then another. One of her pages becomes her abettor in the matter of securing books and reading them. Thus begins an amusing but also thought-provoking saga of how reading can change a person's habits and even outlook.

April, 2009

This Book Discussion Guide was developed by Elizabeth Brignac, who has an MA in English literature from UNC-CH and teaches English composition and literature.