

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society Book Club Guide

About the Book

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.

About the Authors

Mary Ann Shaffer became interested in Guernsey while visiting London in 1976. 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, to help her finish the book.

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*.

Annie Barrows, whose career also included libraries, bookstores, and publishing, is the author of the Ivy and Bean series for children, as well as *The Magic Half*.

San Francisco Chronicle Book Review

Some novels are memoirs; some are treatises; some are exercises in linguistic pyrotechnics. But sometimes a novel is just a novel, and this can be a very good thing, when it works.

"The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society," written by the late Mary Ann Shaffer and her niece, children's author Annie Barrows, stays within modest bounds, but is successful in ways many novels are not. This book won't change your life, but it will probably enchant you. And sometimes that's precisely what makes fiction worthwhile.

Traditional without seeming stale, and romantic without being naive, "The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society" follows writer Juliet Ashton as she searches for a book topic and stumbles upon new friendships and loves. Juliet achieved renown as a London columnist during World War II, writing lighthearted weekly takes on surviving the bombardment. Postwar, she feels listless. Her new book proposal leaves something to be desired, and her life in

London is slow-paced and wan. Then Juliet receives a letter from an unknown man, Dawsey Adams, who lives on the Channel Island of Guernsey and has stumbled across a secondhand book she once owned.

The novel widens from there into a history of Guernsey's occupation by the Germans during the war. During the occupation, a group of islanders formed a literary society, but this was no ordinary endeavor. Elizabeth McKenna, one of the group's founding members, was sent to a prison camp after she was caught harboring a Nazi worker. The society took on new purpose after her deportation. Juliet quickly realizes that this group is prime material for a book, but in the meantime she has become enamored of successful American publisher Mark Reynolds. Mark takes her to the opera, and sends flowers and relentless notes. As Juliet learns more about the islanders, she must make difficult decisions that will affect who she is and who she will become.

What makes this novel lovely is its light touch and how effortless the writing

seems. This effortless shine through even though the book is written as a series of letters, and just enough gaps are left to make the format seem true to life. Each character or letter writer has a distinct voice: crafted, real and warm. The authors love books and clearly love writing. Reading the novel is enough to produce nostalgia for the days of envelopes and stamps.

Though the novel's style doesn't break any ground, its familiarity is more an homage than a rereading of old themes. Many of the characters cite Austen and the Brontës. With its sharp-witted heroine and her lineup of potential suitors, "Guernsey's" plot is obviously influenced by those authors' books. Likewise, the structure pays tribute to the earliest novels: epistolary romances, written by women and ignored by some as trivialities. "Guernsey" situates itself in this stylistic history but retains elements of light humor and stays true to its own time. Yes, it's hopelessly romantic, but it doesn't ignore the complications that adult romance often brings. It touches on the darkness of wartime, the complexities

of human compassion and the lack thereof. It's sunny through bad times, without being relentlessly optimistic.

This makes it all the sadder that Shaffer died in February. It's unclear how much of this book was her work and how much her niece's, but her publisher describes Barrows' role as more of a helper than a helmsman. Shaffer worked as an editor, a librarian and a bookseller in the Bay Area. She studied Guernsey and its history for years after a spontaneous trip there in 1976. Her love for books was deeply authentic, and her passion for Guernsey went well beyond the research for this novel. One would like to think that much of the reason "Guernsey" succeeds is because it was written out of genuine interest, with true affection for the form.

It's tempting to throw around terms like "gem" when reading a book like this. But "Guernsey" is not precious; it's dear, or even darling. 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.

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”?