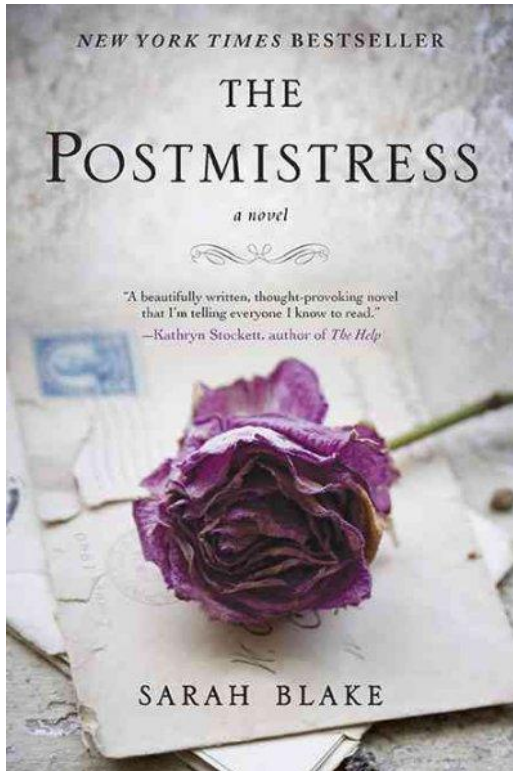


## Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1400359>

### About the Book



*Those who carry the truth sometimes bear a terrible weight...*

It is 1940. While war is raging in Europe, in the United States President Roosevelt promises he won't send American boys over to fight.

Iris James is the postmistress and spinster of Franklin, Massachusetts, a small town on Cape Cod. Iris knows a lot more about the townspeople that she will ever say. She knows that Emma Trask has come to marry the town's young doctor. She knows that Harry Vale, the town's mechanic, inspects the ocean from the tower of the town hall, searching in vain for German U-Boats he is certain will come. Iris firmly believes that her job is to deliver and keep people's secrets, to pass along the news

of love and sorrow that letters carry. Yet one day Iris does the unthinkable: she slips a letter into her pocket. And then she does something even worse - -- she reads the letter, then doesn't deliver it.

Meanwhile, seemingly fearless American radio gal Frankie Bard is working with Edward R. Murrow, reporting from the Blitz in London. Frankie's radio dispatches crinkle across the Atlantic, imploring listeners to pay attention to what is going on as the Nazis bomb London nightly. Then, in the last, desperate days of the summer of 1941, Frankie rides the trains out of Germany and reports what is happening. But while most of the townspeople of Franklin are convinced the war "overseas" can't touch them, Iris and Emma --- unable to tear themselves away from Frankie's voice --- know better.

Alternating between an America on the eve of entering into World War II, still safe and snug in its inability to grasp the danger at hand, and a Europe being torn apart by war, the two stories collide in a letter, bringing the war finally home to Franklin.

*The Postmistress* is a tale of three unforgettable women, of lost innocence, of what happens to love when those we cherish leave us. It examines how we tell each other stories --- how we bear the fact that that war is going on at the same time as ordinary lives continue. Filled with stunning parallels to our lives today, it is a remarkable novel.

### About the Author



Born in New York City, Sarah Blake is the author of a chapbook of poems, *Full Turn* (Pennywhistle Press, 1989), an artist book, ***Runaway Girls*** (Hand Made Press, 1997) in collaboration with the artist, Robin Kahn, and two novels. Her first novel, ***Grange House***, (Picador, 2000) was named a "New and Noteworthy" paperback in August, 2001 by The New York Times. Her second novel, ***The Postmistress***, will be published by Amy Einhorn Books/Putnam in February 2010. Her essays and reviews have appeared in *Good Housekeeping*, *US News and World Report*, *The Chicago Tribune* and elsewhere.

Sarah taught high school and college English for many years in Colorado and New York. She has taught fiction workshops at the Fine Arts Works Center in Provincetown, MA, The Writer's Center, in Bethesda MD, The University of Maryland, and The George Washington University. She lives in Washington DC with her husband, the poet Joshua Weiner, and their two sons.

### Reviews

Booklist \*Starred Review\*

To open Blake's novel of World War II and the convergence of three strong women is to enter a slipstream, so powerful are its velocity, characters, and drama. How can you resist Frankie Bard, an American journalist of gumption and vision who is bravely reporting on the Blitz from London? Her distinctive

voice and audacious candor are heard on radios everywhere on the home front, including Cape Cod, where Iris James, in love for the first time at 40, keeps things shipshape at a small-town post office. The third in Blake's triumvirate of impressive women, Emma, the waiflike wife of the town's doctor, is not as obvious a candidate for heroism until a tragedy induces her husband to join the war effort. As Frankie risks her life to record the stories of imperiled Jews, Iris and Emma struggle to maintain order as America goes reluctantly to war. Blake raises unsettling questions about the randomness of violence and death, and the simultaneity of experience--how can people frolic on a beach while others are being murdered? Matching harrowing action with reflection, romance with pathos, Blake's emotional saga of conscience and genocide is poised to become a best-seller of the highest echelon.

### *Library Journal*

Frankie Bard is a young female reporter in London during the Blitz, working with the likes of Edward R. Murrow and Eric Severeid. Her broadcasts make an impression on the residents of Franklin, MA. Dr. Will Fitch and wife Emma, garage owner Harry Vale, and postmaster Iris James, who in 1940-41 don't know how or if the war will affect them. Harry is sure the Germans are about to land on their beach, while, hearing Frankie talk of an orphaned boy, Emma and Will don't feel the news goes far enough. Iris insists that "there is an order and a reason" to everything, and "every letter sent - proves it." First novelist Blake doesn't let her work fall prey to easy sentimentality; this story is harsh and desperate, as indeed is war, but her writing is incisive and lush: a house missing a piece of mortar, "as if it had been bitten"; a distracted Iris, with "sand-dribbling out of the bag of her attention." VERDICT Even readers who don't think they like historical novels will love this one and talk it up to their friends. Highly recommended for all fans of beautifully wrought fiction.

### *Kirkus Reviews*

Three women on the eve of America's involvement in World War II consider the volatile nature of truth in the face of tragedy. Iris James is postmistress for the town of Franklin on the tip of Cape Cod. Everyone's secrets pass through her hands, but Iris, a 40-year-old virgin, reveres the ethical standards her position confers, order imposed on the chaos. New to Franklin in September 1940 is Emma, young Dr. Will Fitch's bride, an orphan who hopes that marriage and the close community will bring her the family she's missed. While residents enjoy the quiet of fall on the Cape - everyone but Harry Vale, who perches on the upper floor of Town Hall looking out to sea for U-boats, they listen to the radio broadcasts of Frankie Bard, a pioneering female American journalist covering the Blitz in London. Her report about an orphaned boy prompts Will, reeling from the recent death of a patient during

childbirth, to go to London and help the wounded in penance. Frankie briefly meets Will in a bomb shelter, where he makes a disturbing confession: He can't return to his life on the Cape; the war and his usefulness during it have made him happy. Upper-crust Frankie is also exhilarated by the war, but as she and Will exit the shelter the next morning, she sees him hit and killed by a taxi. Frankie's boss, Ed Murrow, sends her to the continent to interview Jewish refugees fleeing Germany; she also witnesses executions and realizes the enormity of the task ahead. Back on the Cape, Emma, heavily pregnant, doesn't know what to make of Will's disappearance. But Iris does; she confiscated the letter informing Emma of Will's death. Then Frankie shows up, surprised that everyone thinks Will is still alive. The loose ends that plague every tale and the fractional nature of knowing are the central themes of this narrative, which plays with the idea of storytelling. Quietly effective work from first novelist Blake.

### *Publishers Weekly*

Weaving together the stories of three very different women loosely tied to each other, debut novelist Blake takes readers back and forth between small town America and war-torn Europe in 1940. Single, 40-year-old postmistress Iris James and young newlywed Emma Trask are both new arrivals to Franklin, Mass., on Cape Cod. While Iris and Emma go about their daily lives, they follow American reporter Frankie Bard on the radio as she delivers powerful and personal accounts from the London Blitz and elsewhere in Europe. While Trask waits for the return of her husband, a volunteer doctor stationed in England, James comes across a letter with valuable information that she chooses to hide. Blake captures two different worlds, a nave nation in denial and, across the ocean, a continent wracked with terror, with a deft sense of character and plot, and a perfect willingness to take on big, complex questions, such as the merits of truth and truth-telling in wartime.

### **Discussion Questions**

- 1.** Much of *The Postmistress* is centered on Frankie's radio broadcasts --- either Frankie broadcasting them, or the other characters listening to them. How do you think the experience of listening to the news via radio in the 1940s differs from our experience of getting news from the television or the internet? What is the difference between hearing news and seeing pictures, or reading accounts of news? Do you think there is something that the human voice conveys that the printed word cannot?
- 2.** "Get in. Get the story. Get out." That is Murrow's charge to Frankie. Does *The Postmistress* make you question whether it's possible to ever really get the whole story? Or to get out?

- 3.** When Thomas is killed, Frankie imagines his parents sitting miles away, not knowing what has happened to their son and realizes there is no way for her to tell them. Today it is rare that news can't be delivered. In this age of news 24/7, are we better off?
- 4.** Seek Truth. Report it. Minimize Harm. That is the journalist's code. And it haunts Frankie during the book. Why wasn't Frankie able to deliver the letter or tell Emma about meeting Will? For someone whose job was to deliver the news, did she fail?
- 5.** If you were Iris, would you have delivered the letter? Why or why not? Was she wrong not to deliver it? What good, if any, grew up in the gap of time Emma didn't know the news? What was taken from Emma in not knowing immediately what happened?
- 6.** In the funk hole, Will says that "everything adds up", but Frankie disagrees, saying that life is a series of "random, incomprehensible accidents". Which philosophy do you believe? Which theory does *The Postmistress* make a better case for?
- 7.** After Thomas tells his story of escape, the old woman in the train compartment says "There was God looking out for you at every turn." Thomas disagrees. "People looked out. Not God." He adds, "There is no God. Only us." How does *The Postmistress* raise the questions of faith in wartime? How does this connect to the decisions Iris and Frankie make with regard to Emma?
- 8.** Why do you think Maggie's death compels Will to leave for England?
- 9.** The novel deals with the last summer of innocence for the United States before it was drawn into WWII and before the United States was attacked. Do you see any modern-day parallels? And if so, what?
- 10.** What are the pleasures and drawbacks of historical novels? Is there a case to be made the *The Postmistress* is not about the 1940's so much as it uses the comfortable distance of that time and place in order to ask questions about war? About accident? Aren't all novels historical? Why or why not?
- 11.** We know that Emma was orphaned, that Will's father had drinking problems, that Iris's brother was killed in the First War, and that Frankie grew up in a brownstone in Washington Square. How do these characters' backgrounds shape the decisions that they make? And if we didn't have this information, would our opinion of the characters and their actions change?

12. Early in the novel, Frankie reflects on the fact that most people believed that “women shouldn’t be reporting the war.” Do you think that Frankie’s gender influences her reporting? How does Frankie deal with being a female in a male-dominated field? And do you think female reporters today are under closer scrutiny because of their gender?

13. Why does Otto refuse to tell the townspeople that he’s Jewish? Do you think he’s right not to do so?

14. Why is the certificate of virginity so important to Iris? What does it tell us about her character?

15. When Frankie returns to America, she doesn’t understand -- finds it impossible to grasp -- that people are calmly going about their lives while war rages in Europe. What part does complacency play in *The Postmistress*?

16. Discuss the significance of the Martha Gellhorn quote at the beginning of the book, “War happens to people, one by one. That is really all I have to say, and it seems to me I have been saying it forever.” What stance towards war, and of telling a war story does this reveal? How does it inform your reading of *The Postmistress*?

## Multimedia

### ***Telling Stories of War, One Person at a Time (Radio Broadcast)***

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=123388977>

An NPR discussion of the novel.

### ***Sarah Blake discusses The Postmistress in Lancaster (Video Clip)***

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXH21Zo6K2g>

A 2011 speech on her novel by Blake.

## Further Reading

### ***Blitz: the story of December 29, 1940*** by Margaret Gaskin

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1278196>

(Call number: 940.542 Ga)

As she conducted research for a completely different story in her own town, London journalist Gaskin kept running into the date, and finally realized that before she could continue, she had to reconstruct that one night of German bombing in one square mile of London. She draws on news reports, letters, memoirs, and other sources to discuss the personal as well as military aspects.

**Grange House** by Sarah Blake

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1168310>

(Call number: Fiction Blake)

Maisie Thomas spends every summer at Grange House, a hotel on the coast of Maine ruled by the elegant Miss Grange. In 1896, when Maisie turns 17, her visit marks a turning point. On the morning after her arrival, local fishermen make a gruesome discovery: drowned lovers, found clasped in each other's arms. It's only the first in a series of events that casts a shadow over Maisie's summer. As she considers the attentions of two very different young men, Maisie also falls under the gaze of Miss Grange, who begins to tell her disturbing stories of her past. Rich with the details, customs, and language of the era, *Grange House* is a wonderfully atmospheric, page-turning novel of literary suspense and romance.

**Author's official website**

<http://www.sarahblakebooks.com/>

Information, news, and resources.

**Read-Alikes** *Source: Books & Authors*

**The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society** by Mary Ann Shaffer

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1314571>

(Call number: Fiction Shaffer)

The island of Guernsey was occupied by German forces during World War II. When a group of Guernseyites stayed out past curfew at a pig roast, they were stopped by a German patrol. To stay out of trouble, the transgressors made up the Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society on the spot. Ever since that incident, the group has had a reason to get together and discuss literature. Juliet Ashton--a writer living in London--learns about the group when one of its members writes her a letter. Dawsey Adams sees Juliet's name in a book and writes to her for help finding more books by that author. Soon, Juliet begins writing to many of the members of the group. When Juliet decides to travel to Guernsey, her life will be forever changed.

**Charlotte Gray** by Sebastian Faulks

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1146288>

(Call number: Fiction Faulks)

In 1942 a pretty young woman named Charlotte Gray comes to London from her home in the Scottish highlands, looking for work. She wants to help out the war effort. She finds London practically in ruins, and the only work available to her is secretarial, which leaves her feeling unsatisfied. She falls in love with a wounded RAF pilot named Peter Gregory and has a passionate, doomed wartime affair with him. When she hears that his plane has been lost over France, she is heartbroken but determine to go to France herself,

join the resistance, and make a real contribution to the fight against Nazism. The novel features a remarkable portrait of wartime France and a psychological profile of Gray's development under the pressure of wartime adversity.

***The Night Watch*** by Sarah Waters

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1259766>

(Call number: Fiction Waters)

In London during World War II four ordinary Londoners' lives intersect-- Kay, an ambulance driver; her lover Helen; Duncan, a conscientious objector; and Duncan's sister, Vivian, whose lover is a married soldier. Working backward in time beginning in 1947 to 1941, the novel gradually reveals the network of connections that joins these characters to one another and the historical moment. Waters' strength is delivering the routine details of wartime life.

***Resistance*** by Owen Sheers

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1307081>

(Call number: Fiction Sheers)

It's 1944 and the Allied forces are being forced back by the Germans. The D-Day Invasion was a complete failure, and Germany has taken Russia. The Germans have moved beyond France and are now invading villages in Britain. Sarah Lewis and the rest of people in her small, secluded village in the Welsh Ochlun Valley hear about the attacks on the radio. Suddenly, the men of Sarah's town vanish completely during the night. Sarah and the rest of the women in her agricultural community take on all the responsibility to keep their farms running. Then, a group of German soldiers invades the small village, and hostility fills the town. The tensions between the soldiers and the British women soften when a cold, blustery winter seals off the village from outside contact. The soldiers and the women will have to work together to survive. But, what will happen when the winter thaws and the war is again reality?

**\*\*Book Club To Go!\*\*** ***Suite Francaise: A Novel*** by Irene Nemirovsky

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1264926>

Irene Nemirovsky was a Russian-Jewish emigre to France in the 1940s. She converted to Catholicism and, as France was overrun with Nazi troops, began a series of novels designed to chronicle the lives of ordinary French people under German occupation. This volume contains the first two books of the planned series. In the first, *Storm in June*, a varied group of Parisians flees the city for the relative safety of the countryside. The second, *Dolce*, focuses upon a village called Bussy, where Nazi troops, evacuated Parisians, and frightened townspeople uneasily coexist. Nemirovsky never completed



the planned five-book cycle, as she was sent to her death at Auschwitz in 1942.

*Summaries from AADL.org Catalog*

**Extra!**

Frankie's broadcasts are central to the story in *The Postmistress*. Stream Edward R. Murrow's wartime broadcasts to evoke them for the group.

[http://www.archive.org/details/murrow\\_in\\_london\\_1942](http://www.archive.org/details/murrow_in_london_1942)

