

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on:

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society

Author: Mary Ann Shaffer

Name: Mary Ann Shaffer

Born: 1934

Deceased: February 2008



Career:

Librarian, Editor, Bookseller

Writings:

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society

Sidelights:

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 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 (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.



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Reviews:

Booklist 104.21 (1 July 2008): p34

Winding up her book tour promoting her collection of lighthearted wartime newspaper columns, Juliet Ashton casts about for a more serious project. Opportunity comes in the form of a letter she receives from Mr. Dawsey Adams, who happens to possess a book that Julia once owned. Adams is a member of the *Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*—no ordinary book club. Rather, it was formed as a ruse and became a way for people to get together without raising the suspicions of Guernsey's Nazi occupiers. Written in the form of letters (a lost art), this novel by an aunt-and-niece team has loads of charm, especially as long as Juliet is still in London corresponding with the society members. Some of the air goes out of the book when she gets to Guernsey; the humorous tone doesn't quite mesh with what the islanders suffered. But readers should enjoy this literary soufflé for the most part, and curiosity about the German occupation of the British Channel Islands will be piqued.

—Mary Ellen Quinn

Library Journal 133.12 (1 July 2008): p6

In January 1946, London is beginning to recover from World War II, and Juliet Ashton is looking for a subject for her next book. She spent the war years writing a column for the *Times* until her own dear flat became a victim of a German bomb. While sifting through the rubble and reconstructing her life, she receives a letter from a man on Guernsey, the British island occupied by the Germans. He'd found her name on the flyleaf of a book by Charles Lamb and was writing to ask if she knew of any other books by the author. So begins a correspondence that draws Juliet into the community of Guernsey and the members of the Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society. Named to protect its members from arrest by the Germans, the society shares their unique love of literature and life with a newfound friend. Seeing this as the subject of her next book, Juliet sails to Guernsey—a voyage that will change her life. Reminiscent of Helene Hanff's *84 Charing Cross Road*, this is a warm, funny, tender, and thoroughly entertaining celebration of the power of the written word. This marvelous debut novel, sure to have book club appeal, is highly recommended for all collections. —Susan Clifford Braun

Kirkus Reviews (15 June 2008)

The German occupation of the Channel Islands, recalled in letters between a London reporter and an eccentric gaggle of Guernsey islanders.

This debut by an "aunt-niece" authorial team presents itself as cozy fiction about comfortably quirky people in a bucolic setting, but it quickly evinces far more serious, and ambitious, intent. In 1946, Juliet, famous for her oxymoronic wartime humor column, is coping with life amid the rubble of London when she receives a letter from a reader, Dawsey, a Guernsey resident who asks her help in finding books by Charles Lamb. After she honors his request, a flurry of letters arrive from Guernsey islanders eager to share recollections of the German occupation of the islands. (Readers may be reminded of the PBS series, *Island at War*.) When the Germans catch some islanders exiting from a late-night pig roast, the group, as an excuse for violating curfew and food restrictions, invents a book club. The "Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society" is born, affording Guernseyites an excuse to meet and share meager repasts. (The Germans have confiscated all the real food.) Juliet's fractious correspondents, including reputed witch Isola, Booker, a Jewish valet who masquerades as a Lord, and many other L&PPPS members, reveal that the absent founder of their society, Elizabeth, loved Christian, a German captain. No one accuses Elizabeth of collaboration (except one crotchety islander, Adelaide) because Christian was genuinely nice. An act of bravery caused Elizabeth's deportation to France, and her whereabouts remain unknown. The Society is raising four-year-old Kit, Elizabeth's daughter by Christian. To the consternation of her editor and friend,



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Reviews: (continued)

Sidney, Juliet is entertaining the overtures, literary and romantic, of a dashing but domineering New York publisher, Markham. When Juliet goes to Guernsey, some hard truths emerge about Elizabeth's fate and defiant courage. Elizabeth and Juliet are appealingly reminiscent of game but gutsy '40s movie heroines. The engrossing subject matter and lively writing make this a sure winner, perhaps fodder for a TV series.

Publishers Weekly

The letters comprising this small charming novel begin in 1946, when single, 30-something author Juliet Ashton (nom de plume Izzy Bickerstaff) writes to her publisher to say she is tired of covering the sunny side of war and its aftermath. When Guernsey farmer Dawsey Adams finds Juliet's name in a used book and invites articulate—and not-so-articulate—neighbors to write Juliet with their stories, the book's epistolary circle widens, putting Juliet back in the path of war stories. The occasionally contrived letters jump from incident to incident—including the formation of the *Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* while Guernsey was under German occupation—and person to person in a manner that feels disjointed. But Juliet's quips are so clever, the Guernsey inhabitants so enchanting and the small acts of heroism so vivid and moving that one forgives the authors (Shaffer died earlier this year) for not being able to settle on a single person or plot. Juliet finds in the letters not just inspiration for her next work, but also for her life—as will readers. (Aug.)

Bookmarks Magazine 1994

"Traditional without seeming stale, and romantic without being naïve" (*San Francisco Chronicle*), this epistolary novel, based on Mary Ann Shaffer's painstaking, lifelong research, is a homage to booklovers and a nostalgic portrayal of an era. As her quirky, loveable characters cite the works of Shakespeare, Austen, and the Brontës, Shaffer subtly weaves those writers' themes into her own narrative. However, it is the tragic stories of life under Nazi occupation that animate the novel and give it its urgency; furthermore, the novel explores the darker side of human nature without becoming maudlin. The *Rocky Mountain News* criticized the novel's lighthearted tone and characterizations, but most critics agreed that, with its humor and optimism, Guernsey "affirms the power of books to nourish people during hard times" (*Washington Post*).

"*The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* is a sweet, sentimental paean to books and those who love them.... It affirms the power of books to nourish people enduring hard times." —*Washington Post Book World*

"[A] marvelous debut.... Reminiscent of Helene Hanff's *84 Charing Cross Road*, this is a warm, funny, tender, and thoroughly entertaining celebration of the power of the written word." —*Library Journal*

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

"A poignant, funny novel that celebrates the resilience of the human spirit.... This one is a treat." —*Boston Globe*

"A sure winner.... Elizabeth and Juliet are appealingly reminiscent of game but gutsy '40s movie heroines." —*Kirkus Reviews*

"I've never wanted to join a club so desperately as I did while reading *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*....[The novel] is a labor of love and it shows on almost every page." —*Christian Science Monitor*



Spotlight on: The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society

Discussion Questions: From LitLovers.com

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. What makes Sidney and Sophie ideal friends for Juliet? What common ground do they share? Do you now have or have you had people in your life who have offered similar support to you?
3. Dawsey first writes to Juliet because books are so difficult to obtain on Guernsey in the aftermath of the war. What differences do you note between bookselling in the 1940s and bookselling today? Do book lovers share common qualities across generations?
4. What were your first impressions of Dawsey? How is he different from the other men in Juliet's life?
5. Discuss the writers who capture the hearts of the members of the *Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*. Does a reader's taste in books reveal anything significant about his or her personality?
5. Whose lives are changed the most by their membership in the society?
6. In what ways are Juliet and Elizabeth kindred spirits? What does Elizabeth's spontaneous invention of the Society say about her approach to life? What does her bravery reveal about it?
7. Numerous Guernsey residents give Juliet access to their private memories of the occupation. Which voices were most memorable for you? What is the effect of reading a variety of responses to a shared tragedy?
8. How does Remy's presence enhance the lives of those on Guernsey? Through her survival, what recollections, hopes, and lessons are preserved?
9. What historical facts about life in England during World War II were you especially surprised to discover? What qualities of wartime experience are captured in a detail such as the invention of the potato peel pie? Are there ways in which fiction can provide the means for more fully understanding a historical reality?
10. Which member of the Society was your favorite? Whose literary opinions are most like your own? Do you agree with Isola that "reading good books ruins you for enjoying bad ones"?



Spotlight on: *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*

About the Book: From ReadingGroupGuides.com

"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.

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?



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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"?