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Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Society by Mary Ann Shaffer

Discussion questions used at SPL June 2013

1. How did you like the formatting of this book? Did you like reading letters to learn about the characters?
2. How much did you learn about Juliet in the first few pages? Did she seem like someone you'd like to know?
3. What did the two letters of reference tell you about Juliet? Which one was the best portrait of her?
4. The literary society is a bit different than book clubs, but the result is the same. . . talking about writers and books and how those books support, change, challenge the reader. What difference has a book club made in your life?
5. P 67. . .reading good books ruins you for enjoying bad books. . . agree?
6. How did she do weaving in the history of the occupation? Did it make the book too dry or did it add to the book?
7. P 75 . . . *Americans, esp., who are not touched by the war.* . . why do you think she thinks that?
8. What did you learn about Elizabeth through the other's letters? Were she and Juliet alike in ways?
9. Is letter writing a lost art? How important are letters to you?
10. P108. . . I think you learn more while you're laughing. . . is that a description of this book as well?
11. Did it make sense that a German was befriended? Did it help show human nature?
12. P123
13. There were so many sad stories told in this book. . . which touched you the most?
14. Why do you think the author wrote the story of the Guernsey occupation this way, rather than as a history book?
15. What did you think of Mark, the man romancing Juliet? Did you think Sydney loved her, too?
16. What did you think of Dawsey, the man from Guernsey who started all this. . . When Juliet met him, was he what you imagined him to be?
17. Did it make sense for Juliet to be so drawn to Elizabeth. . .would you have liked to read the book she was writing?
18. For Juliet, perhaps the worst part of the war was thinking about sending your children to safety. . . what do you think you would have done?
19. P 296 -- an interesting bit about putting the bad things behind you as a society. . . do you think that is the way to go? Do we hold on to things too long?
20. This book is filled with odd but likable characters - do you think such people thrive in smaller communities? Or are they everywhere? Or are they just made up for this novel!
21. Which "door" of this book drew you in? The characters? The setting? The writing? The plot?
22. Would you recommend this to someone?

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General discussion questions

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author's writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author's use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?

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The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Society

Discussion questions taken Reading Group Guides

http://www.readinggroupguides.com/guides_g/guernsey_literary_pie_society1.asp#discuss

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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One Minute Reading Guide

<http://oneminutebookreviews.wordpress.com/2008/11/24/a-totally-unauthorized-reading-group-guide-the-guernsey-literary-and-potato-peel-pie-society-a-novel-by-mary-ann-shaffer-and-annie-barrows/>

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Early in 1946, Juliet Ashton receives a letter from a pig farmer who found her name and address on the flyleaf of a secondhand book of essays by Charles Lamb. Juliet writes back to Dawsey Adams and learns that he belongs to an offbeat book club, the Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society, on a Channel Island once occupied by Nazis. She begins to correspond with club members and, after deciding to visit them, becomes enmeshed in their lives – though a handsome American publishing tycoon is courting her back in London. Juliet had been hoping to put the war behind her. But on Guernsey, she gains a deeper awareness that she can't escape history: "The war is now the story of our lives, and there's no subtracting it."

Questions for Discussion

1 The obvious question first: What did you think of the title of this novel? Did you pick up the book despite or because of it?

2 How well did the novel-in-letters format work? Why do think the authors chose it? What do we gain from reading the letters that we might not get from a more conventional narrative?

3 Many critics gave this novel raves. But Wendy Smith qualified her generally favorable review in the *Washington Post* by saying that the book has a "contrived" premise: "The authors don't even bother to suggest how Juliet's discarded book turned up in Guernsey, and the neat way its literary society fits into her *Times* assignment is highly convenient."

www.powells.com/biblio?isbn=9780385340991 Did you find all or part of the plot contrived? Does it matter whether it is?

4 Juliet has two men interested in her, each of whom has appealing traits, just as the heroines of many romance novels do. Is this novel essentially an intelligent romance novel? Why or why not?

5 Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows weave many details about the Nazi occupation of Guernsey into their story. For example, Eben Ramsey says that late in 1944: "We were rationed to two candles a week and then only one." [Page 64] Novels based on historical research sometimes read more like term papers than fiction. Did you ever feel that way about *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*? If not, why? How did the authors keep their research from slowing the pace of the story?

6 Juliet's parents died when she was 12. [Page 45] Dawsey is an adult orphan who lost his father when he was 11 and his mother just before World War II. [Page 232] Many beloved novels, from *Jane Eyre* to the Harry Potter books, involve orphans. Why do you think this is so? How does *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* resemble other orphan novels you've read?

7 A book club member named John Booker quotes the Roman orator Seneca: "Light griefs are loquacious, but the great are dumb." [Page 150] What did he mean? Booker was talking about grief for concentration camp victims, but could the quote apply also to people in this novel? Does it express a theme of the book?

8 "Reading good books ruins you for enjoying bad books," Isola Pribby writes to Juliet. [Page 53] Is this true? Or are books like food in that a lot of us can savor a five-star meal and still hit the Fritos Scoops during the Super Bowl?

9 *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Pie Peel Society* has many amusing lines and scenes. Which did you like most? What role does humor play in the novel?

10 The authors salt their story with quotes or anecdotes about well-known writers. Did these make you want to read some of the authors' books? Which, if any, would you like your book group to read?

Dulce Et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of disappointed shells that dropped behind.

GAS! Gas! Quick, boys!-- An ecstasy of fumbling,
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time;
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And floundering like a man in fire or lime.--
Dim, through the misty panes and thick green light
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

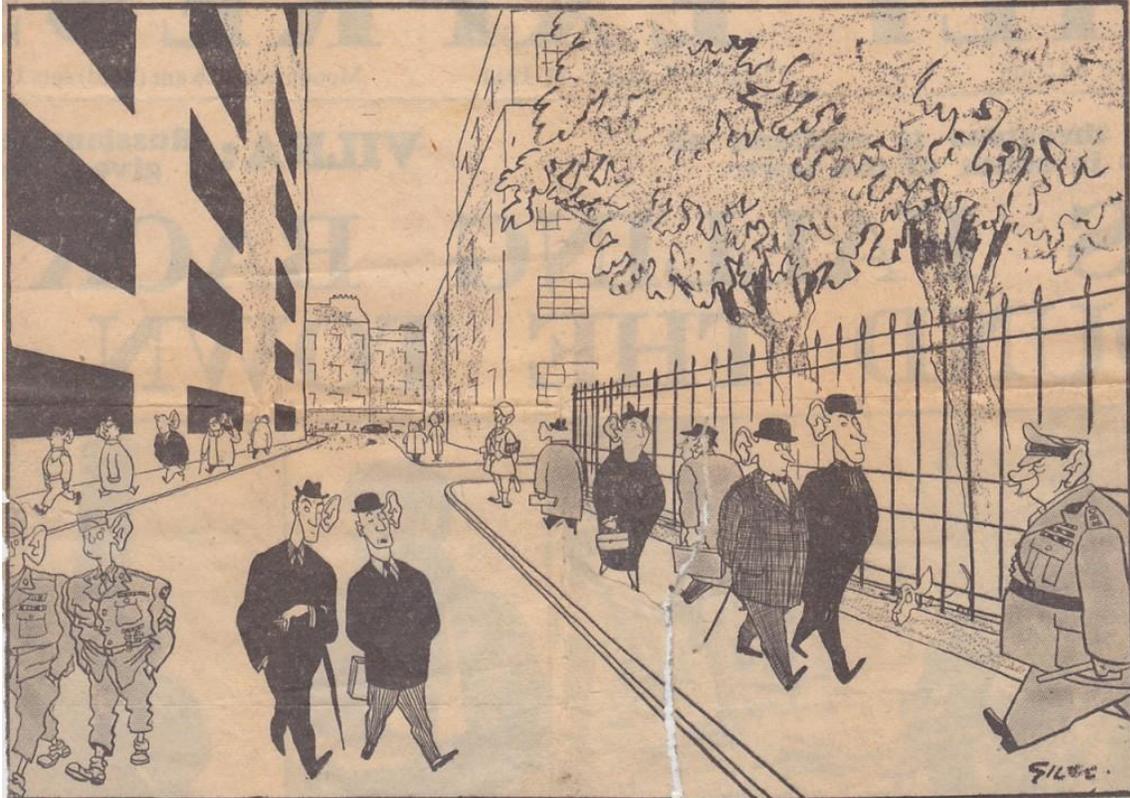
In all my dreams, before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,--
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.*

It is sweet and
Die for his country

42,000 people during wwii

London - July 11, 1944
I sent this clipping to my mother & father



'It's ridiculous to say these flying bombs have affected people in ANY way.'