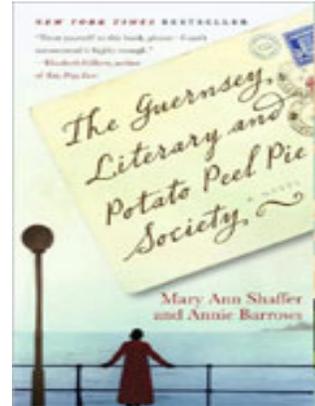


The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society

by Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows

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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"?

Annie Barrows ~ Author Interview

Annie, you wrote *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* with your aunt, Mary Ann Shaffer, who sadly passed away before the book came to print. It is one of the most delightful books I've read in a long time. Can you tell us how she came up with the story?

Mary Ann was visiting England in 1980, and on a whim, she decided to fly down to Guernsey. Once she was there, “a terrible fog” rose from the sea and enveloped the island, and all ferry and plane service was shut down. Immured in the airport for seventy-two hours, Mary Ann passed the time warming herself under the hand-dryer in the men’s restroom (the one in the women’s restroom was broken) and reading all the books she could find in the airport bookstore.

Apparently, in 1980, the airport was the primary outlet for local publishing, and the subject of most of their books was the German Occupation of the island during the second World War. Mary Ann was always fascinated by accounts of the war, but this episode was unknown to her. She was riveted, there under the hand-dryer, gulping down book after book. When she was finally allowed to fly out, she brought half the contents of the airport bookstore in her suitcase.

That was the beginning of the story, but she didn’t start writing the book for until twenty years later, when she became part of a writing group that cajoled and demanded and begged her to complete the manuscript.

Mary Ann asked you to finish the book when her health declined. I never noticed a change of style or voice. How did you manage to do that so seamlessly?

Before I began, I was a little worried about my ability to carry through with Mary Ann’s voice, but once I sat down and started writing, I realized that hers was a voice and a style that I knew from the inside out—because I had been hearing it all my life. Mary Ann and my mother always lived near each other, and their stories were the wallpaper of my life. Without noticing it, I had come to tell a story in the same way that she did, so working on the book felt very natural.

You also write adult fiction under the name of Ann Fiery. Do you have a new work in progress you'd like to tell us about?

I used to write non-fiction under the name Ann Fiery (I thought that having a pseudonym was cool), but for the last five years, I’ve been writing children’s books under my regular name, Annie Barrows. Now I’m working on a novel for adults, but as Juliet says, it’s a “tiny infant of an idea, much too frail and defenseless to risk describing.”

Whether it's children or adult fiction, novelists sometimes dig themselves into a hole over implausible plots, flat characters or a host of other problems. What's the most difficult part of writing for you?

For me, the most harrowing aspect of writing is my utter inability to determine whether what I’ve written is good or vile. How can my critical faculties, so razor-sharp when it comes to muffins or pants or other people’s books, melt away in the face of one of my own paragraphs?

How do you overcome it?

Aging. I try to ignore euphoria or despair and just stick the manuscript in the deep freeze for a couple of days or weeks. When I read it again, my reaction is much more reliable than the immediate post-writing frenzy.

Where do you write: In a cave, a coffeehouse, or a cozy attic nook?

It's not particularly cozy, but it is in an attic. The best thing about my office is that it's at the top of my house and I look out into leaves—red and green right now. If I shove myself into a corner, I can see a little smidge of the Pacific Ocean, too.

The worst thing about my office is that they stopped manufacturing filing cabinets in white about five years ago, which has resulted in an unfortunate expansion of papers into the suburbs of my floor, windowsills, and bookshelves.

One of the many books I read too young was that one about the two brothers in New York who never threw away their newspapers and were crushed to death by falling piles and only found when they started to smell. This could happen to me.

What does a typical day look like for you?

I race around getting my children to school and reconstituting my house until about 9:30 or 10, when I get into my office. I have to deal with a lot of email these days, so the first hour or so is devoted to that. I've had four books published this year, so I've had lots and lots of production issues and publicity events to take care of.

It's a constant battle to get through the daily blitz and find time to write and think—if I get six hours a week of real creative work done, that's a success. My heroine is Jane Austen, who wrote all of her books at a table in the middle of her family's sitting room, with her mother nagging and visitors dropping in and people asking her to hold their yarn. If she could do it, I can do it.

Do you prefer creating or editing? Why?

I much prefer creating to revising. When I talk to kids, the teachers always want me to say that I love revising, but I don't. I will say it's important, but writing something for the first time is really what I love.

I do like editing other people's stuff.

What are a few of your favorite books (not written by you) and why are they favorites?

Little Women, by Louisa May Alcott. Okay, it's a kids' book, but I love it. Plus, I think it's a great work of art about the difficulty of being peculiar in America.

The Letters of Charles Dickens, v. 1-12. I adore reading letters, and I adore Dickens. This edition, published by Oxford University Press, has about eight million footnotes, which is glorious. It took me five years to read all twelve volumes, and I'm about to start the whole thing again.

Mansfield Park, by Jane Austen. This is one of the Austens "that nobody reads," but it's my favorite because the author champions moral fiber over glitz and manages to make us all agree that dull Fanny Price is a heroine and charming Mary Crawford is a villain.

Jane Eyre, by Charlotte Bronte. This book drives me crazy. I just can't figure out what the heck is going on from chapter 28 to 36. But still, I read it over and over.

The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor. More letters from another fabulous writer. She kept peacocks.

Cloud Atlas, by David Mitchell. I read this last year and was transfixed. Six novels in one, a feat of imagination and writerly verve.

The Long Walk, by Slavomir Rawicz. Everyone should read this. It's the story of a man who escaped from a Soviet prison camp during World War Two—by walking to India. You will never complain again.

His Dark Materials trilogy, by Philip Pullman. Along with everyone else in the world, I devoured these books. I've never read so fast in my life.

My Sister Eileen, by Ruth McKenney. My family runs to sisters, and this book makes all of us laugh and laugh.

What's the best writing advice you've heard?

You have to write from a position of strength. You can write about despair, but you can't be in despair as you write because despair is the antithesis of creation.

Do you have any parting words of advice?

Whew. I don't think I'm in any position to give anyone advice on writing. It's just as improvisational for me as it is for anyone else.