

Guernsey Literary & Potato Peel Pie Society

Author Background

Mary Ann Shaffer

- Birth—1934
- Where—Martinsburg, West Virginia, USA
- Death—February, 2008

In 1976, inspired by a newfound fascination with Guernsey, Mary Ann Shaffer travelled to the island in the English Channel, only to be stranded there due to inclement weather. Waiting for a thick fog to lift so she could return to London, Shaffer read all the books in the Guernsey airport bookstore. *Jersey Under the Jack-Boot* sparked a particular interest in the German occupation of the Channel Islands.

Years later, prompted by her book club to write a novel of her own, Shaffer turned to this subject in creating the vivid world of *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*. Told entirely through a series of letters — because, Shaffer confessed, "for some bizarre reason, I thought it would be easier" — the novel skilfully renders the characters and concerns of Juliet, Sidney, and the other residents of Guernsey who have just emerged from the horrors and hardships of the Second World War.

Mary Ann Shaffer made a career working with books—as an editor, librarian, and bookseller—before her death in February 2008. She died knowing that her novel was scheduled for publication and in then good hands of her niece and co-author, Annie Barrows.

Annie Barrows

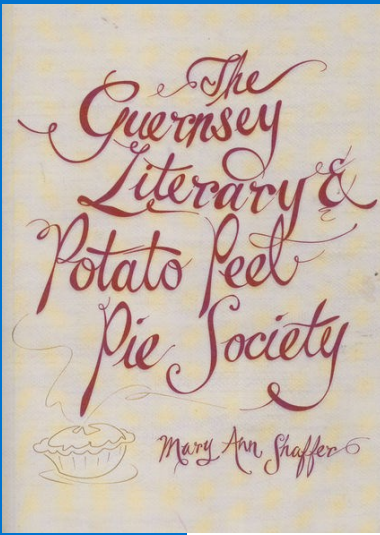
- Birth—August 24, 1962
- Where—San Diego, California, USA
- Education—B.A., University of California, Berkeley; M.F.A., Mills College
- Awards—numerous, for her children's series *Ivy* and *Bean*
- Currently—lives in Berkeley, California

A voracious reader (but an admittedly poor speller!), one of Annie Barrows' first jobs, while she was still in school, was re-shelving books in one of her favourite haunts, the public library. After college graduation, she went to work for a publisher, editing books in many different fields.

Bitten by the writing bug, wrote several books on such diverse topics as fortune telling, urban legends, and opera before branching into children's literature. In June of 2006, she released *Ivy and Bean*, the first award-winning book in a series about two young girls who become best friends in spite of their differences. In 2007, she published *The Magic Half*, a standalone children's fantasy about the middle child (between two sets of twins) who travels back in time and befriends a young girl in need of her help.

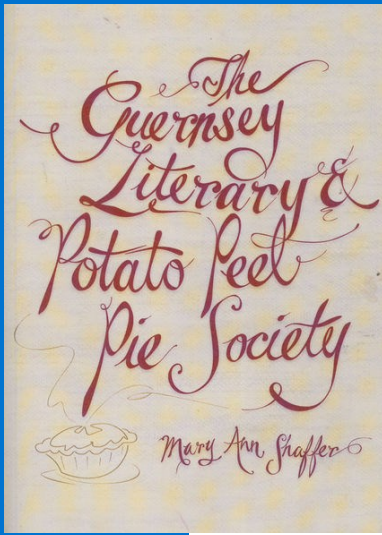
In addition, Barrows and her aunt, the late Mary Ann Shaffer, collaborated on a post-WWII epistolary novel entitled *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*. Conceived by Shaffer, the novel was accepted for publication shortly before Shaffer fell ill. Barrows stepped in to complete the project, and the book was published in 2008 and became a best seller.

(From *Barnes & Noble*.)



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Book Summary

The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society

Mary Ann Shaffer and Annie Barrows, 2008

Random House

280 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780385341004

“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.

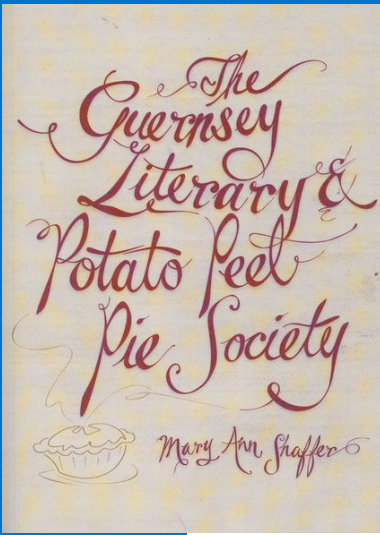
(From the publisher.)

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Discussion Questions

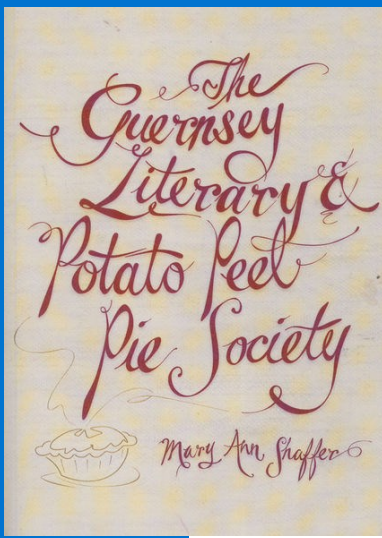
1. What was your experience reading a novel composed entirely of letters? Are there types of information or emotion that letters convey more successfully than other forms of expression? Would a novel in emails have different strengths and weaknesses?
2. What makes Sidney and Sophie ideal friends for 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 favourite? Whose literary opinions are most like your own? Do you agree with Isola that "reading good books ruins you for enjoying bad ones"?

(Questions issued by publisher.)



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Reviews

Though it deals with a dark period in history, this first novel is an essentially sunny work. It affirms the power of books to nourish people enduring hard times—not so surprising, since Mary Ann Shaffer, who died earlier this year, had a long career as a librarian, bookseller and editor. Her niece Annie Barrows, a children's author, finished the manuscript after Shaffer fell ill;

between them, they crafted a vivid epistolary novel whose characters spring to life in letters and telegrams exchanged over the course of nine months shortly after the end of World War II.... You could be skeptical about the novel's improbabilities and its sanitized portrait of book clubs (doesn't anyone read trashy thrillers?), but you'd be missing the point. *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* is a sweet, sentimental paean to books and those who love them.

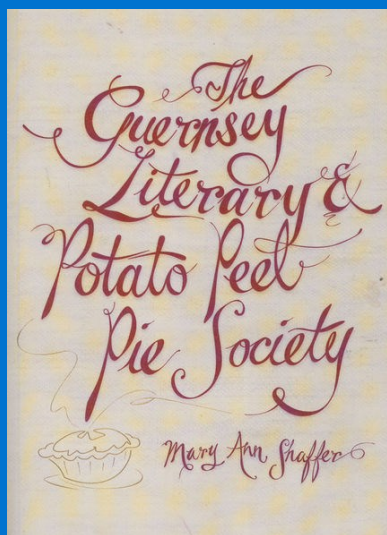
Washington Post

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.

Publishers Weekly

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

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Reviews (continued)

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, 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.

Kirkus Reviews

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.

Library Journal